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WITH STRANGE AEONS

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ABSTRACT: WITH STRANGE AEONS

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With Strange Aeons is a contemporary diaspora story of alienation and stark choices.

Wome, a quiet Cameroonian university graduate has just moved to New York City from Rhode Island to take up a job. There, he meets Shokare, a combative nonconformist who challenges him to break free of the "African bubble" to which Wome has begun to attach himself. Not wholly persuaded, Wome is nevertheless drawn by Shokare's charisma and eclecticism. Wome's eyes are opened to the energy and possibilities of life in 1990s New York and, despite his shyness he becomes involved with a Canadian woman, which further complicates his sense of belonging.

Shokare becomes frustrated with work and disaffected from a city he perceives as in the grip of consumerist fever. His sense of alienation is aggravated by ambivalence for his home country, Nigeria. Following a series of ill-judged choices, Shokare's life begins to unravel. Wome tries to intervene but his friend seems intent on abasing himself utterly, becoming more and more desperate. In the end Wome is no longer certain of what he can believe in. Shokare's fate terrifies him and yet he finds the alternative, duty and responsibility, increasingly noncompelling.

## With Strange Aeons

June

It was in Brooklyn, at a backyard barbecue, during those heady weeks after graduation that Wome and Shokare were first thrown together. Wome had come down from Brown University, one of many young Africans fresh in New York. But the city was unmoved by these incomers with their Ivy League degrees and signing bonuses, and so too was Shokare, who'd studied at Fordham and cared little about Princeton or Dartmouth. Shokare knew the city. He'd walked its streets in the days when there was a *laissez-faire* mayor at City Hall, rubbish in the streets and addicts on stoops. He professed to miss the edginess that vigorous policing effaced like a stain but, as so often with nostalgists, this was both posture and putdown.

The barbecue at which the two men met was one of a hundred in Brooklyn that summer. On offer were fingers and flans of manufactured meat, beer and lurid soft drinks from a nearby bodega. The garden was a shapeless, scrubby lawn bounded by weather-stained picketing and scarcely able to accommodate the grill, two tables and bodies. The people present made a pretense of networking but simple lust was in play. Early summer is when New York gets to grips with naked flesh for the sun shines crisply enough to linger outside. Come August, the street tarmac melts to the soles of shoes and humidity tightens like a vice across the lungs.



Apart from these milling young Americans in saggy white singlets and halter necks, a knot of five African men stood a short way from the potbellied grill. They too were hopped up on a few weeks of city life. None had even glanced at the food but several fists clutched beer bottles and redness had begun already to dawn in some eyes. They shouted rather than spoke, confident their voices would be swallowed in the general buzz.

Wome, still sipping his first beer, was quietest of the five; he alone did not compete to be heard. Rather, his long, fine-boned head turned toward this face or that to follow what was said. He knew two of the men, Christopher and Mohammed, if not well; his own friends had found jobs in Washington or Boston. In any case, he remembered these two as studious, even stony undergraduates incapable of raising the sort of yammer they now made. The others, Lanre and Kunle, had so far been matey toward Wome out of reflexive solidarity, which made him uneasy.

They were discussing the future, with no fewer than two hoarse voices mingling in any moment. Wome struggled to discern a coherent sentence from the spouting jumble of words but managed only to pick out the frequent references to Harvard, McKinsey, and Abuja.

Then, into the tumult, with its surging non-rhythm, broke the jeer of an unfamiliar, male voice. "Whetin any of you fit do for *Naija*, for Africa sef?" They jumped and puzzled frog faces swung about. Christopher, a Ghanaian, identified the source of the intrusion but he said nothing, did not even need to point and the others simply followed his stare. From the far side of a table bearing chips and condiments a compact man with a complexion neither light nor dark was watching them. A tiny smirk bent the corners of his eyes but the overriding impression received was one of combativeness. His skull had been closely shaved, which made his forehead seem especially massive.

Kunle said, "Excuse me?"

"Tell me, why, after you don taste the good life for America, when you get one fine *oyinbo* or *acata* wife, why you go wan' leave? Fashi." He laughed but no one in the circle shared in his mirth. Heads swiveled instead to see if *acata* had been overheard. It seemed not. The woman—surely an African American herself—who stood next to the sneering stranger seemed oblivious to any slur.

"So you think," Kunle rearranged his bulk, "life in America is too attractive for me, us, to ever give up. Not that it's your concern, whoever the hell you are, but my obligation to Nigeria and Nigerians is too strong." At this, there were murmurs, a shuffle of feet; Mohammed and Lanre wanted to speak.

The stranger, who seemed immune to the notion of introduction, said, "But what can you really do?" Your father and my father, twenty seven, thirty years ago, they were about the same age as all of us here." His down-turned finger took in the group. "They were full of optimism; colonialism was ending. And *whetin* happen? Africa never change yet. What makes you different?"

Kunle fell silent, plump lips clamped together in a glower and it was Christopher who asked, "Where are you from?"

"I'm an African, like you."

"He's *Naija*. He must be *Naija*," guessed Mohammed, a Sierra Leonean.

"You're not from Lagos," Lanre accused with a vehemence that named him a Lagosian.

But their antagonist refused to be diverted. "Good. So we know ourselves. I'm still curious though to hear how you sages think your MBAs can save Africa."

Lanre stretched out his arm in introduction. "I'm Lanre."

The other gave his own name with evident reluctance. "Shokare."

Kunle, careless of being noticed, mouthed, "Bendelite," to Wome and Christopher.

Lanre was saying, "Nigeria's future will depend on foreign investment. After B-school, I'll return home to help the government divest of utilities, oil holdings, and state banks, which should begin in a five- to six-year time frame. Foreign investors will be partnered with local companies to help privatized entities run profitably." It was reeled off as glibly as a description of breakfast but the others said nothing. Lanre wasn't alone in nursing such ambitions.

Shokare kissed his teeth. "The government has relinquished most of its control over the oil. And what's the result? Oil has cursed us. Yes, even those of us who aren't from the Delta region." His gaze rested on Kunle's face. "Nigerians are still blindly hopeful but countries with fewer resources are further on than us. Look at Ghana. What do we have? A few billionaires. Oil go *dabaroo Naija* finish, just watch." Christopher and Mohammed, who'd endured numerous 'Giant of Black Africa' speeches failed to hide smiles even as Lanre's face became vexed. "But *fashi* all that. You've been in New York only a few weeks, abi?" Shokare was tutting. "And already you dey worry about six, seven years down the line. What of the present?"

He received only looks of bafflement. Unhappily for Lanre and for those eager to revive the earlier conversation, Shokare noticed the hostess sidestepping her grill, her eyes fixed on them, this obstinate cluster of men who neither mingled nor ate. She unfastened the cheesecloth apron about her waist and allowed a little grimace to come over her face as she came closer.

Christopher, who always tried to be reasonable, began to make a plea but Shokare rode over him and Wome recognized in his words a master stroke. "*Eyin* boys, before these people tink say we be *okobos*, circulate, ah beg. Fine women dey here." And, heeding his own advice, he moved off with malice in his eyes.

As Shokare's jibe struck home it was as if all five started awake in the same moment from a shameful dream. Sheepish glances went around the circle and Mohammed and Kunle took half-hearted steps toward the table with its platters of graying meat. Christopher went to intercept the hostess, foolishly grinning and Lanre was muttering to Wome, kissing his teeth, "Me? Gay?" Not for the last time, Wome was reminded of boys with whom he'd attended school. Cunning, implacable boys skilled at instilling neuroses in other youths.

"What was that about?"

"What?"

"You jumping into people's conversation like that."

All Brooklyn smelled of charred meat. Shokare wanted to walk a bit, to talk and think. Tara's brownstone was a few blocks away. He said, "How d'you know I don't know them?"

"I know you didn't. I saw their faces when you spoke to them in pidgin o." As he laughed at Tara's joke, the guilt eased a little. "Plus you had that smug look you get when you're pissing on someone's parade." She punched his arm lightly. "You were rude to me too. I was in the middle of telling you..." Shokare chose this moment to link arms with Tara and her words tailed off.

"I know, sorry. But I hate people like that. I had to say something."

"People like what, Shokare?" He liked how she said his name: trying to get it right but not too hard.

"You wouldn't understand. It's an African thang." He watched her face sidelong. She hated his twisting these clichés.

"Fool. So, what was to hate about those guys?"

"Individually they might be alright but together there's this God complex. We can rescue Africa with our Harvard MBAs. But if you said to them, 'what we need more than anything is rural primary school teachers,' you think they'd sign up? No." Shokare bit the word off. "They've got their big degrees. Goldman Sachs on their CVs." Tara smiled at the inadvertent rhyme. "They all want to be power brokers, bumping back and forth between the World Bank and the finance ministry in Abuja or wherever, hobnobbing with robber barons. Big men. Everybody in Africa wants to be a big man."

"And you. What do you want?"

He stood still. "I just graduated. Fuck knows."

"I thought so." Tara tugged at his arm. "I'm going this way."

"Come to Frank's for a quick drink. I'm all keyed up." Her only response was to lower her chin to look at him.

"Not that kind of keyed up. I'd be pacing."

"Come to mine later, then. But not if you're really drunk."

Early on Sunday morning, dressed in his slim black suit and a new and expensive tie, Wome left his apartment on Fort Greene Place. He walked up the incline of Fulton Street past shuttered shops. At the southernmost corner of the small, little-used park that separated Fulton Street from Greene Avenue he crossed to the latter. At his back now was the low-hanging sun and he went on a little further then turned from Lafayette's wide pavement to enter the lofty, coffin-shaped doors of the Clinton Washington Methodist Church.

The pew he thought of as his, number 14, equidistant from front and rear had not yet been taken. Wome had occupied it only once before but he sat now at its near edge with the slender relief that comes from gratified habit. Spine taut, his long legs slantwise so others

could pass, he thumbed through a hymnal, seeing one or two hymns he knew. Four years ago, soon after arrival in Providence, he attended his first American church service and experienced disappointment. The sermon had been brief, the pastor too much like an ingratiating classmate. Even the singing sounded contemporary, pop-inflected. Wome wanted to accost the pastor afterward, 'You're mistaken. God doesn't want to be our friend.' But this was not his way and for the sake of his studies, it had not been difficult to forgo church for much of his time as an undergraduate.

About him now there were children but few adults. Whispering, brightly clothed girls were flower petals in the moments when they sat still. To Wome's ears came the low, wearied groan of old men with no need to moderate their voices. They'd seated themselves early, glad to set down limbs that tired easily in the heat. Their dark blue suits were somber and of unembellished cut. Wome saw only one male of his own age, tie-less, in jeans and a slack button down shirt. This young man cast uneasy glances across the church from the nook he'd chosen, out of reach of sunlight.

Mothers and older sisters came in, briskly settled children on the un-cushioned benches and then went to linger out of doors in the lifting haze. Wome did not know what they were waiting for outside and guessed it was perhaps a free moment in which to gossip over a cigarette, to admire one another's finery. For if the girls were eye catching, both young and mature women were gaudy. Pink and yellow ribbons decorated red or green hat brims. But milling outside the church doors afforded the women a chance also to size up incomers. On his way in, Wome had drawn appraisals from matrons and he cast his eyes downward in embarrassment and thought, they must have daughters my age.

Pew 14 still belonged solely to Wome as the women blew in with a rush and a rustle, like a wedding party. The owners of the grandest hats took their seats on the foremost pews as the doors were pulled shut. In the gathering heat and the sound of wood creaks of wood,

the reverend showed himself. Fitzroy was handsome, blurring at the edges and perhaps forty years of age. Unmarried too, presumably for a tension slipped like current through the congregation. In a voice already husky with strain, Fitzroy began with an invocation from the Book of Job. "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?"

The first time the preacher's voice climbed above its weary register, bodies sat up straighter. One old man nodded repeatedly to himself, eyes closed. Wome absorbed Fitzroy's instruction to pray equally in prosperity as in woe, fitting them with little difficulty to his new circumstances. Head cocked as though daydreaming, a woman a few pews ahead murmured and sighed at the preacher's cajoling. "Uh huh. That's right." The pastor's voice lulled as it exhorted. Infants had begun to drowse in inattentive arms and flapping wrists fanned faces.

A hymn—Amazing Grace, which Wome knew—was sung and with such force it belled and echoed through the air for many moments. The service finished quickly as Wome knew it would. Fitzroy must conserve energy for the main noon sermon. As the church began to empty, Wome squeezed his eyes tight to recite the Lord's Prayer but he uttered the words in his mind, silently rather than mouth them. Then he offered another prayer for his family in which he asked for strength to endure.

Blinking to banish stars, Wome opened his eyes and saw two others remained seated in the nave. On a bench parallel to his own a cow-faced young woman, a girl even, sagged forward, murmuring and staring wide-eyed at nothing Wome could see. He followed her lips for a moment or so and made out the words, witness, guidance. And still he tarried. In spite of the midmorning light, the church nave now held something of the aura of attar and centuries-old apprehension Wome associated with the Catholic Church.

Palm over his eyes against the glare, he exited the church, receiving a few nods on his way. The mood beyond the tall, sturdy doors had changed. Children leaned shyly against the

legs of their parents and the stares of inquisitiveness Wome noticed as he was entering were no longer evident. One older man with an air of being caught up still in psalm-singing offered him a gentle, "Good to see you again, brother."

'Again.' This word took hold in Wome's mind on the short walk home. His return had been noted and yet nothing had been asked, nor expected of him. Yet he detected he'd moved a sure step nearer fellowship with the congregation although he could not pinpoint what this meant. He would linger, perhaps, the next week, or even attend the main service. One or two of the younger women had been very attractive.

At home, he removed his suit, inspected for grime the collar of the white shirt then spared careful moments folding the tie into its box and to arrange his shoes. The walls of his bedroom remained unadorned but he did not mind. The room had been configured for sleep and little more.

Wome now went into the living room and arranged himself on the couch to telephone his parents. It was the best time although they will have begun to drowse after a heavy post-church lunch. His father would be marking test papers by now, pausing to hear an item on *Radio France Internationale*. Wome struggled to imagine his parent's lives as they had become in the absence of himself and his sister, or how quiet it must be in the tiny family house.

A ritual quality has already overtaken these telephone conversations although he has not yet grown used to speaking often to Maman and Pere; he could not afford telephone calls as a student. So he found it easier still to their wellbeing from the letters they sent. Since he came to America, his mother has written him two long letters each month. His father's correspondence, penned in English, was irregular. But the mail traveled slowly and Wome frequently opened letters and read of matters already relayed to him over the telephone. Yet, he would not ask them to hold back information that he guessed would be set out in their



He tried now to relax but the television failed to distract him. Nowadays, he tilted too readily into bouts of nostalgia, for childhood as much as home. He still nursed a nagging regret that he'd not found a job in Washington and this in turn dredged up older grudges. Sharpest of these, a prickling disappointment still, was the crushing sorrow he felt at not having gone to secondary school in Europe.

*After France, where his sister was, England became his second hope—he wanted to see the Beefeaters. But anywhere in Europe would do. Lyon had wrought little positive in Kab but she'd grown and great height was what he most wanted as a child. The first time Kab returned to Douala from boarding school, Wome was almost tearful at how much she'd grown. Never thick-thewed, Kab seemed formed of nothing but muscle and sinew. Marguerite blamed French food for not filling out her daughter. Kab's face was marred by acne but he teased her about it only once. The violence that ensued was startling because Kab did not lose her temper. She beat Wome merely to silence his gibes and her fists were knouts. He sucked back tears and held his tongue for shame, daydreaming of retribution.*

A hand over his forehead, Derek exited his bedroom in a clomp of feet. "I've got a monster hangover," he announced. It was the same greeting he'd offered the previous Sunday.

Wome, uncertain whether to commiserate, said, "Morning."

Derek fried cheese, bacon and eggs into a mush, which he prised from the skillet onto a too-small plate. "So I went to this bar last night. The Cub Room, d'you know it?" He sat beside Wome on the sofa and scurried food into his mouth with a fork. Derek expected little and so Wome made the occasional murmur to show he was listening. Wome knew more about Derek than he'd divulged of his own life albeit not much: Derek was twenty four, a junior reporter for the New York Post from Indiana, in the Midwest. This causes Wome to think of Nigeria, which also has a Midwest. Once, as he waited for the subway, Wome flicked through the New York Post and decided it was a newspaper for a squalid,

lawless parallel New York he didn't know. Post reporters frequently surprised on-duty police officers in topless bars or happened by as politicians were clinching illicit deals with crime lords over breakfast.

But Derek knew nothing about Wome other than he'd been at Brown, that he was African. His roommate had no inkling, certainly, that Wome went to church. "See you later, man," Derek said. The living room, after his roommate went out, smelled not of eggs but of coffee.

God willing, Wome thought, I'll be in Douala for Christmas. But there was six months to get through, six months in which he must remain in the here and now and keep his feet to the ground. "What of the present?" The Nigerian stranger had asked at the barbecue yesterday. The mocking question had been directed at all of them and it was as apt for himself, Wome thought, even though he did not have a ten-year plan like Mohammed or Lanre. His own problem was that he was sunk in the past.

But there was another sour taste in Wome's mouth, a hangover related also to the previous evening. Shokare's taunt about homosexuals clustered together had sowed doubts and as he took leave of the others, Kunle particularly had seemed reluctant to shake his hand. No one tried to persuade him to come along to Frank's for a drink.

He dozed and then woke, oppressed by thirst and mid-afternoon heat. He was sweating and a fly in the room sounded resentment in the whine of its wings against the window. Wome reached for the phone.

"Chris."

"Hey. What's good? That guy was at Frank's. The one from the BBQ. Shok whatever his name was. With two very dodgy characters in sunglasses."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No, but Kunle went over and asked why he was such a self-hating African."

"What did he say?"

"No idea. I was following his advice, actually and focusing on the present, *chale*."

Christopher laughed. "I met a nice Jammo sauce."

Amid perspiring bodies fatly straining against clothes, Shokare clutched the pole on an uptown 2 train. The air conditioner blew but with little effect. The train was old, rickety and red. Shokare stared, making his face flat. A dozen voiceless interactions and rebuffs unfolded in the subway car. A pair of boys in too-long maroon blazers swapped laughing whispers and one of them slouched, trying to peep up the skirt of a drowsing middle-aged woman. Her frayed stiletto heels marked her out as a secretary.

Walled away behind Fela's music, which was piped into his brain through headphones, Shokare supposed it was the sensation of being caged, however briefly, in an iron subterranean can that awakened visible listlessness in the commuters around him. Women carelessly ogled other women. A favorite game and one which Shokare played at times unconsciously, was to rate a woman's attractiveness from the way other women appraised her with sliding, up-down eyes as she moved through a subway car. It was the fixity of men's gazes which betrayed them. He was staring now at a tall, hard-jawed woman braced with feet apart against an exit not three meters from him. Spike heels pushed her to a height over six feet and her half-closed eyes dared any man to approach. Ballbreaker, Shokare thought.

At Spring Street he got down, angling his arms away from his body so the early heat and the exertion of climbing stairs did not stain his armpits. He wanted to skive off and waste the day lolling in Washington Square. It had been too long since he'd talked and smoked to no purpose with bicycle messengers and the smalltime peddlers.

"Morning, Teun," Shokare greeted, and hated, his boss. Teun arrived first in the office of Thomas & DaSilva, Shokare suspected, to start the day with a snort of top-grade cocaine. Even now, the man's eyes were a watery cobalt. Nearer noon as Teun began to hit creative stride, they would pale to a hateful Alice blue. Shokare felt like a menial whenever Teun looked at him. In his pencil suits, the Dutchman's long limbs and colorless hair gave him a spidery appearance. It had not taken Shokare long to recognize Teun had a prodigious capacity for creative work.

Thomas of Thomas & DaSilva never came to the office but the latter was the agency principal, to whom Teun reported. In turn, the Dutchman was supported by three assistant creative directors: Vanessa, Paulo and William. Shokare, a creative associate, came next in the office hierarchy and after him there was only the office assistant, Marjorie, an older black woman whose adze eyes warned against any overtures.

Shokare had impressed Teun and Vanessa in his interview by using branding jargon without being glib. They liked that he was Nigerian, Teun had said, but did not explain why. Something, he suspected, to do with notions of injecting a jungly, raw aesthetic into the boutique's work. When Teun called a week later to make an offer Shokare allowed himself to sound gratified but not too much.

The office next to Teun's stood unused. Shokare suspected Teun dared not offer it to Vanessa, who was first among equals, because William and Paulo would resign. All three in fact occupied adjacent cubicles. Inside his own cubicle, which had been formed from a hasty subdivision of the kitchen, Shokare set down his shoulder bag. The only things on his desk were a tiny, futuristic black phone and the transparent business cards that bore his title, and which had so excited him the first week. He looked at his watch and kissed his teeth softly. It was too early for a cigarette.

Seated in his cubicle, from which he was unable to see the sunlit sidewalks of East 28<sup>th</sup> Street and the spurt of passersby, Wome felt nevertheless content. Before he fell sleep at night, he couldn't escape the sensation of being an imposter. He'd stumbled somehow into tenancy of a life and an apartment not his by any rights that made sense. But the Formica walls of his daytime existence shielded him and the unwinking glare of the computer screen offered both comfort and distraction. His supervisor gave him instructions and he complied. Except that she'd told him to call her Kristin and he was unprepared for such familiarity so he simply avoided use of her name.

The social demands of work were less calculable. Wome's workspace lay between those of two women who even now were talking over his head. He ignored them until Betsy said, "Feel free to jump in, Wome," at which the columns of numbers he was trying to reconcile raveled into so much garble and he was forced to start again. He wanted simply to be left alone.

Amanda, his neighbour on the other side, had a faint new tan on her cheeks and forehead from the weekend. She had studied marketing at Columbia and managed to smuggle this information into her first conversation with him before dismissing Brown as arty farty.

A moment's silence passed before Wome realized Betsy was speaking to him again. "You don't really want to bond with us, do you, Wome?" Betsy was tall, amiable; her dark eyes held a curiosity unrelated to office matters.

"Why do you say that?" Wome half-stood, trying to keep both women in view at once. He failed; his cubicle was too small. Since Amanda's arty farty comment, he was aware of her listening and darting sidelong looks at him whenever he talked to Betsy.

"You never eat with us. You ignore my questions." Most days Amanda and Betsy left the office shortly after noon with cries of being starved. These, Wome now guessed,

were intended for his ears. They'd return—he didn't know from where—with clear plastic trays, infiltrating into the office the smells of bacon, olives and cheese.

But Wome didn't want sandwiches. He'd found an Indian restaurant, Diamond of Calcutta, on 30<sup>th</sup> street. The *jalfrezi* was well-seasoned and the *bhindi* carried the taste of childhood. Plus, he needed rice and preferred to wolf his lunch rather than eat it crouched over his desk where the noise of his chewing might be overheard and the pungent scent of cardamom and garlic would embarrass him. He said, "I need to make some calls. Tomorrow I'll come for lunch." He did not want to appear odd, to draw attention to his foreignness. No one had warned him so much non-work interaction would be necessary in the office.

The next day, by precisely midday Wome had raked together sufficient courage to stand and wonder aloud, "So where should we go for lunch?" Amanda raised an eyebrow, which he pretended not to see.

Betsy was coy. "What do you feel like?"

"There's an Indian restaurant around the corner. Diamond of Calcutta. It's good."

Betsy hesitated. "No Delhi belly, I hope?"

Support came from Amanda, surprising Wome. "Why not? Indian would make a nice change."

The dinginess of his favourite restaurant caught Wome's eye as never before. The walls had turned gray with old grease and one corner of the ceiling had begun a slow collapse. The food though looked hot and appetizing and all three sat with heaped plates. Outside in the sun, a disproportionate number of women seemed to be walking dogs.

Amanda asked how things were with his account but Wome said only, "Not bad," and training his eyes on his plate, he did not elaborate.

Betsy blurted, "Oh, Wome, I almost forgot, the New York Association of Advertisers is having cocktails Thursday. It's an annual thing, so the new intake at the big firms can schmooze. There'll be creatives as well as us drones." She blew on a heaped forkful of potatoes to cool it. "We don't *have* to go, Kristin says, but we should. It's at the Waldorf. Six thirty. I thought we could work late and go directly there." She appeared to be waiting for his assent so Wome nodded.

"Ah, Africa's angel. Or one of them, at least. You won't be much use on the continent Africa as an adman, you know. I don't think even the Yanks could successfully market Nigeria."

The drawling presumption in the tone irritated Wome although the face, with its derisive twist, *was* familiar, even if he could not attach a name to it. Wome stared past the man into the huddle, pretending he'd have heard nothing. He'd begun to feel ill at ease from the moment he arrived at the Waldorf with Betsy and Amanda. The acoustics in the ballroom made a squall of 200 voices. Of that number, perhaps six or eight dark skinned people—Wome did not count himself—relieved the grinning monotony of whiteness. He resisted the faint pull to draw near this or that punctuation of color, remembering from Brown the meaningless tendency of minorities to cluster.

But the man beside Wome was persistent. "You were one of those at that cookout, plotting to save or damn, I'm not sure which, our beloved Africa." His accent see-sawed between England and suggestions of Nigeria. The Bendelite, Wome remembered and then tried to efface the thought. His name was Shokare or something similar. Wome widened his eyes to convey vague recollection of a meeting. 'I am actually Cameroonian,' he wanted but could not quite bring himself to say and so he introduced himself. He considered himself a reasonable mimic, although Shokare's intermittent Englishness, his overdone way with

pidgin would be difficult to imitate. Still Wome could copy it closely enough, Shokare's *phonerre*, this trick of assuming a European or American accent to impress or woo a listener.

Expectant, Betsy looked from Shokare to Wome. First rolling the name silently across his tongue, Wome tried to elide some of its alienness for her. "This is Shok, Betsy." It sounded not unlike shark.

Shokare offered her an unsmiling nod. Then, glaring in Wome's eye, he amended: "Shokare Osakue." Betsy echoed him, folding her lips over the syllables. But Shokare only kept his brow peaked in disapproval of Wome's shameless Americanization of his name.

Wome ignored him again and took Betsy's slurping at ice in her plastic tumbler as pretext to go for more drinks. Shokare was cagey. He stood near enough Betsy for a head to head but seemed too withdrawn to take the initiative. He craned his torso, perhaps to match Betsy's height, and scanned the room as if to make sense of the clangor. Wome observed he lacked that air of bewilderment in the other black or brown faces across the room. Wome noticed Amanda appraise Shokare also as she came up but her face gave away nothing.

To forestall return to his tense little clique, Wome did not evade any of the conversations he met on the way to the drinks table. In these groups of three, sometimes more, men, typically executives, held court. The retinue head wagged and murmured in corporate accord, inserting succinct counterfeit laughs into the ready silences. The talk was shop—which big accounts had been won or lost, the cleverness of this campaign, or else summertime banter about the Hamptons and Martha's Vineyard. Wome made no attempt though to elbow his way into any circles. From a hand's breadth beyond, he listened, or tried to, and mustered a few rapt nods. Mere minutes of each was a bellyful and he moved off, signaling his leave-taking with a vague gesture. He felt let down no one noticed him



come or go. The hope that he might have ten minutes to himself was dashed. He'd been seen by a vice president from his own firm.

Graham Moriarty's cheeriness came off as faked but also exhausting. And why, Wome asked himself, should any vice president seek to curry favor with anyone as insignificant as me? He and Moriarty shared an ability to speak French but Moriarty scarcely needed practice. His accent was pure Parisian.

Moriarty presented him now to two executives from another firm. "Wome Mbami, a recent graduate of Brown University, now one of our account associates." With a wink, he added, "Un Camerounais." Wome ducked his chin, hiding a wince. But Moriarty's companions were astute enough to see Wome was no prodigy. They muttered a greeting through clenched teeth. Moriarty had fallen silent and Wome too waited. All four seemed to watch for a cue that did not materialize. Expectant moments passed in a silence interrupted, at last, by the approach of Betsy and Amanda. They giggled flirtingly, no doubt from Shokare's attention.

"Let's fuck off somewhere else," Shokare said from behind them, pretend-drunk. He spoke in an accent that was pure English. Wome held back tickling laughter and not only from relief at the rescue. The rival executives tensed as if to meet violence then bared tight smiles once more. Moriarty alone seemed put out when Wome raised eyebrows to excuse himself.

Like kittens tumbled from a cardboard box Wome and the three others spilled onto Fifth Avenue. The sky was milky with clouds. The only cars were occupied cabs speeding North on a wave of green lights. After the heatless clangor of the ballroom the quiet in the streets was a shock. Wome felt surprise, even a little jealousy that Amanda deferred to Shokare. "OK. Where are we going?"

Nearly an hour later, in south Manhattan, but unsure precisely where, Wome took a draw from a bidi. He was slumped in the jamb of a banquette. A Cuban voice came through the bar's speakers over his head. The singer made dulcet-voiced references to his heart. Beside Wome, also supine, was Amanda. Her head, cradled in the crook of his elbow, had put his arm to sleep. Atop the wine—everyone else drank vodka—the scathing Indian cigarette set Wome's skull busily whining. Shokare had warned, "It's only tobacco, but they get a real buzz going." The bidi was sufficiently harsh that Wome could not taste the wine.

In one nook of his brain, he'd begun to fixate on Amanda. That she was sprawled beside him and not Shokare. Per his shallow calculus, he ought now to be fending off Betsy's advances. Yet Shokare, a chain smoker of bidis, seemed content with things as they were. There was a slim space between him and Betsy but his head inclined toward hers. Shokare's earlier aloofness, in fact, had vanished. He maneuvered Wome into the passenger seat so that he might sit with the two women. It was too much effort to speak through the sliding plastic divider so Wome said nothing during the entire ride. He admired the wobble-head dashboard ornaments and listened to Shokare ply Betsy and Amanda with smooth words.

So that when, without contrivance, Wome found Amanda next to him, he was unprepared. And, rather than loosen his tongue, the wine set his mind hurtling and he became reticent. His feelings toward Amanda amounted to a kind of grudging lust. She reminded him of women he'd met at Brown. Outwardly carefree, they hankered after all: money, the perfect family and tasteful, occasional moments of glamour. In the office, she would never set a foot wrong; her coyness was nothing but the politic sort. Wome knew he'd no right to expectations. But Amanda's furtive vigilance pricked his curiosity. He could not even now find the words to ask what lay behind her couched interest. Betsy's frankness, by contrast, presented nothing to delve into. Betsy offered herself at face value.

Wome tried shutting off the whirl of speculation to listen. Amanda raised the pitch of her voice at the conclusion of each sentence. She's as drunk as I am, he thought. Something witty, teasing should work. Instead, he said in a feeble tone, "So what d' you think of Moriarty?"

"So why aren't you with Betsy?" came her supple rejoinder, dismissive of office tattle. She was watching him sloe-eyed from smoke and drink.

"Why should I, or did you want to offer Shokare the booty?" Wome used the slang presuming she'd understand-- with the intent to flatter.

"Where'd you get that idea?" Amanda laughed in her throat, gurgling and bawdy. Women like Amanda invariably had boyfriends and Wome's suspicion received immediate confirmation. "I'm seeing someone."

"Of course." He left the words 'you are' unsaid, wondering what the wine had done to him.

Amanda raised her head from his elbow to stare. She seemed unaware of the subtle teasing her gestures conveyed. The flirtation implicit in lying on his arm, or the way her lips were always a little parted. "Betsy quite likes you. Still, office romances can fuck up your career."

"Betsy wants sex." As soon as Wome said it, this seemed a fishing remark.

"You're not the fuckbuddy type, Wome. Your friend over there is, but he's a bit too smooth for Betsy. She likes your seriousness, I think. Your sharp suits."

The unexpected praise took Wome unawares and his confidence dissipated. Words caught in his teeth as he said, "And what do you like?" Beneath his thigh, he splayed his right hand, a nervous gesture from childhood. He was glad of the music playing and hoped this covered his timidity. Amanda looked in his eye again, as if confirming a brief glimpse of something she might not see again. She was more perceptive than Wome had guessed. On

the point of giving a reply, Amanda chose instead to say nothing and smiled to signal a close of the conversation. Frustration jerked Wome up into a sitting position. Irritation, but surprise as well at having been toyed with by a woman he'd dismissed as empty and avid.

He wanted to prod Amanda for answers, Instead he raised his voice to demand sulkily of Shokare, "What are you two talking about?"

Shokare reacted as though he'd been expecting precisely this question. The words, 'a bit too smooth,' uttered by Amanda only a few minutes before, remained in Wome's head. "We're talking about the differences between Brits and Yanks. You know, culturally."

Shokare explained in the cab he and Wome shared to Brooklyn. Betsy and Amanda lived on the Upper East Side. "I can't grasp American women. I mean, I spent seven years in England. Western women aren't new for me. But the ones here, the men too, actually. Smiling, too-cheery ciphers with loads of angst and other shit bubbling underneath."

"In what way?" Hearing an echo of his own opinion of Amanda failed to stir Wome. His arms and legs had gone turgid from fatigue. In his drunkenness, he felt freighted by the unfamiliar heft of his limbs.

Shokare perched forward on the seat, as though to direct the cab driver with an instruction. He seemed whetted. His eyes glared at Wome but not with malice. For him, perhaps the night had just begun. "I don't know if they can be got at. Very few people here seem capable of real emotional connection. Maybe it's just everyone's too damn ambitious. And interests are so narrow. Shit, I have to find an academic if I want to talk class conflict. It doesn't matter which clique you deal with, really. It's always on the surface. There's a lot of fear about being shown up. Yeah, it's Proust with the literary lot, or the pseudo literary lot, rather. But still superficial chatter. Received wisdom. Bitchy snippets. sound bites from Harold Bloom." Snapping back into the moment, Shokare said, "Have you read Proust?" Wome shook his head. "He's unreadable, painfully convoluted sentences, cloying, genteel

stuff. All starchy grandmothers, aloof fathers and jaunts in the countryside. I don't believe too many of these wankers here have really read Proust. In England, maybe. Not that I think Brits are smarter than Yanks. Straight ahead, no one is, probably. But they've got attention spans, which may or may not be why Yanks are smarter."

The taxi crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and Wome began to look for landmarks. It was his first ride home in a taxi. "But why Proust as a signifier, shorthand for well-read, cerebral?" Shokare went on in the same urgent way, tumbling words off his tongue. More than Joyce, say, or Camus, or even someone more esoteric, like Cortazar? No, he's too contemporary. Borges, maybe. See, I'm doing it too. But, how did we get onto Proust?" Wome tried to conceal his fascination with the amber pall of the sky, which was more lurid on the East bank of the river

"Art history's another signifier. To pursue a BA in art history says I'm wealthy enough to choose a degree with little practical application. I don't know any hetero guys that studied art history. Certainly no black people. But whole flocks of white women go to Ivy League schools to study art history. Then they find jobs in galleries, museums. They write books. Guess what Betsy studied? Yup, Art history at BU. I could run a seminar called art history and the women of the Upper East Side and get rich. I bet the Upper East Side has more art history grads per square mile than anywhere else on the planet."

Through his lethargy, Wome managed to mumble "I didn't know anyone who studied art history at Brown." The evening would go down for him as neither success nor failure.

The taxi stopped to let Wome out first and with a little fumbling, he offered Shokare some bills. Then he hesitated, getting down, to say he'd been listening but Shokare spoke first, and as he leaned in, his mouth smelled to Wome of nothing. As though vodka had

sluiced away the acrid-tasting tobacco which clung even now to Wome's own tongue and teeth. "We're alike, you and I. You don't see it yet, but you will."

How so, Wome wanted to know but his body felt frail. He was too unsteady to endure another tirade. Bidi smoke prickled his throat and he craved water, and sleep. A raised eyebrow was all he managed. The money was roughly taken from his grip and he stepped down, trying not to keel over.

Minutes later, Shokare let himself into his own hot apartment. He lived alone and had returned home late weeks ago and found his door shut but unlocked. He stood at the threshold a minute or so, snapping the lock to and fro with his key, stupefied. Since that day he suspected someone, a stranger entered when he went out. Nothing was ever missed. There'd been no trace of vandalism. Instead, his possessions seemed tampered with. The air carried unfamiliar smells. A pot he thought he'd washed was still in the sink. Shokare set half-hearted traps. But then he'd forgot whether he himself had set the couch at such an oblique angle. He was, in fact, chary to put the matter beyond doubt. He did not believe in the supernatural. Uncertainty thus was preferable to the alternative, whatever this might be.

Satisfied the front door had been locked, Shokare now entered and slipping off his shoes, put them in the small foyer closet and peered into the semidark as if seeing the apartment's recesses for the first time. It was stuffy in the way rooms ranged about a courtyard are, the windows admitting little breeze. Settling himself beside a reading lamp, Shokare adjusted the table fan so it pointed, unswiveling, at his head, and reached for his book. Sleep was some way off.

"Maman told me Franz regrets becoming a teacher. He thinks he should have gone into business. The way prices are going up, they'll be on the street soon." Kah drawled her words in a manner Wome did not care for.

He said, "I'm going to send them some money." Most of his first wages had gone toward suits and shoes but enough remained to spare \$200 for his parents. It was unsettling for the two of them to talk like this, to discuss their parents as though Franz and Marguerite were children.

"Save your money. I send them something every month although Franz likes to pretend they're making ends meet on his salary. Maman humors him, as women do." Kah laughed, but not cruelly. Someone must be standing near her for Wome could think of no other reason why Kah should speak in that nasal Parisian way. "Worry about getting home at Christmas. They're dying to see you."

"I'll be at home at Christmas, Kah." Wome wanted to avoid a quarrel. Friction between them would hurt only Maman and Pere. He'd been pleased and grateful to Kah for attending his graduation a month ago although she had been uncomfortable in such an Anglophone environment. It was the first time she'd stepped into his world and he knew that if he went to Paris, he would not suffer the same sense of being adrift. Kah, of course, scoffed at fat American children and other things besides but she was overawed by the pomp of his graduation ceremony. "I hope you're thankful now you didn't go to *Lycée*." She said after he collected his diploma.

Now she told him, "I'll buy your plane ticket if I have to." Her voice wavered as she spoke to someone in her office and then she rang off without salutation. Surely, Wome thought, Maman wants us both at home.

*When time came for Wome to find a secondary school, funds had run low, and not merely for Franz Mbami. Even government coffers were empty. No one knew where the money had gone, or those who did would not say. Without obvious transition, life became more difficult than a few years earlier.*

*Now, the newspapers held nothing but hints and carefully worded insinuations about graft. Pere became testy and his silences now seemed sulky rather than impassive. Marguerite, shored by reserves of will drawn on only by women, continued as before.*

*But it was not poverty alone that kept Wome from Lyon. Within Maman abided the worry that her nine-year old son lacked the toughness for a life abroad "parmi les Blancs." Kab confounded both her parents, but neither feared for a moment she'd be cowed by a French boarding school.*

*The matter of where Wome went to school was complicated by the nuances of his mother's ideas about Europe. Maman was a fierce Francophile who disliked French self-indulgence. The English were frigid and condescending, tragic in their stiffness. "We Africans," Maman liked to say, "cannot afford the idiosyncrasies of white men."*

*Wome had few dealings with the French students of Douala's Ecole Diderot but his school played football against Diderot's team. The French boys' legs alarmed him and made him laugh. His older schoolmates were already sinewy. In a few years their frames would be tight with muscle. Wome could guess how the sons would turn out from the potbellies and spindle-limbs of the Frenchmen who strutted about Douala. But Kab, when she came home for summer holidays, warned Wome not to lump all white boys together with those at Diderot.*

*Pere and Maman discussed where the boy should go to school. Wome's chief contribution was his plea to be sent to London. He would return to Douala, he imagined, a giant after only his first year, and a basketball player.*

*He dashed off an application to Achimota in Ghana but then Maman developed a mistrust of Ghanaians. Pere's patience frayed to a nub but he never opposed his wife.*



*What remained at the end of an arduous and red-eyed process of winnowing was Clapperton College in Lagos. Goaded by Maman, Franz had applied for Wome in secret. Achimota was acceptable only as a last resort. News that he'd been admitted to Clapperton with a government scholarship ended Wome's last hopes. Not only, as he saw it, was England to be denied him and with it the chance to be tall, but his choice was no choice at all.*

"They're just not interested in my ideas." From Tara's bed, Shokare looked over his shoulder at Tara who was sitting at a desk in the corner. "We've been trying to brand this new gadget, like a Swiss Army knife for the kitchen and I came up with a great idea: call the thing Counter Amigo—it's made by a Spanish company. And market it to men, who love gadgets and convenience. Teun thought the idea had possibilities but his three underlings weren't too excited."

With her index finger Tara pressed a spot on the page of the bulky textbook splayed in her lap. She spoke with exaggerated patience. "Give it time. Try approaching it from a different angle. If it's a good idea, I'm sure they'll buy it."

Shokare sat up. "I don't think so. I'm being hazed. They're trying to mold me. I'm even supposed to dress like them. Synthetic fabrics in gray or black. Tapered pants. Spiky shoes. I chose the wrong job, Tara."

She rolled her eyes. "It's been barely a month, Shokare. What d'you expect? They'd have made you the boss by now? You're never satisfied."

"That's true. I need a career that plays to my strengths. Marketing is supposed to be creative but Teun and the others just seem like failed artists. I can't talk for ten minutes about design flaws in stepladders or....or fridges."

"I may have asked this before but what *do* you want?"

Shokare clapped his hands and held them before him palms out. "Me I don't know oh." His Nigerian accent usually made her smile. "Something, some job where I don't have to pay dues and kiss ass until I can do what I want. I need to be discovered. The way models are. You know, just walking down the road and someone comes up and says, 'Baby I'll make you a star.'"

Tara cocked her head. "So what would they be discovering. In you, I mean?"

"You're so dismissive. We can't all go to law school, Tara. I don't know. My insights? My multiculti, maybe. The thing is I don't have the American knack for self promotion."

"What, even hanging out with me, you haven't picked it up?" She was looking at her book again and her lips moved in recital of some legal formula.

"Anyway, seeing as you're so busy I'm going out for a drink. With one of the guys from that barbecue."

"Which barbecue?"

"The one where they were talking about saving Africa."

"Oh. Which guy?"

"The tall, skinny one. Wome. He was a bit preppy and didn't say a word the whole time."

"What brought this on? Are you going to set him straight?"

"Well, I met him again at some advertising do. He seems alright. A bit of a JJC." Before Tara could ask him to explain, he said, "Johnny Just Come."

"Is he Nigerian?"

"Yes. Actually, I'm not sure. He has a Naija accent, sort of. Come with me." Tara had stuck out her lip and was blowing air onto her face as Shokare, coming near, seized her waist. Hooting, he dragged her to the bed and let her weight topple them both onto it.

Shokare bit her shoulder as she asked, "Do I look like a third wheel?"

"No, I want to get your impression of him. C'mon. Don't be so high maintenance. It's not you."

Tara stopped wriggling and lay very still beneath him. "Watch out." The heat of her skin could be felt through her shirt. Shokare thought she was waiting to be kissed but instead she said. "I can very be high maintenance."

"Why are you here?" Shokare asked in a loud voice. The question clung in the air.

Wome's eyes flicked over the bar in search of eavesdroppers. "Where? In America?"

"In New York. Why are you in New York?" Shokare was brusque.

"I got a job here."

"So you could just as easily have gone elsewhere?"

"I wanted to go to Washington. But Landen Jansen's offer came first."

"You seem very ambivalent about New York. I picture you in Boston."

"Ambivalent?"

"Yeah. Take it or leave it."

Wome drew in his shoulders. "The city is still new. I only came here once before."

"Definitely Boston or any city with its African bubble intact."

"What African bubble?"

"The African scene. Hanging out together. Wanting the same things, plotting the same future. When I was in secondary school in England, *Naijas* in London seemed so cool. Parties." Shokare turned his head and blew out smoke. "Mayfair apartments, Chelsea. Driving my friend's brother's Porsche. After one crazy half term, we came back to school, and we all agreed, Tejan's living the life, damn. That car. Focking cockney babes all over town." Shokare shook his head. "We envied Tejan even more when Namfa, his brother, told

us, 'They've already chosen a beautiful Hausa girl for Tejan to marry. Quiet, a virgin of course.' The whole thing was arranged by their parents. But let me describe Tejan for you now." Shokare paused to take a drink. "I haven't seen him in four years but I know he's a fat cunt. Miserable. Sends his wife from the room so he can do lines of charlie. Appearances to keep up. He's a good Muslim, you know. And Namfa's headed in the same direction if he's not there yet."

"Is that why you're in New York?"

Shokare wrinkled his nose. "I'm not a *Naija* here. Or I don't have to be. I can poke fun at everyone's foibles, whether Yankee, *Acata*, African, *Ajebota*, *Jammo*. Even *Cocoyes*.

"What about that woman you were with? At the barbecue?"

"Tara? What about her?"

"Isn't she African American?"

"Yup. What? Because I use the word *acata*?" Shokare checked his watch and waved to signal the bartender. "Let me get this. I'm sorry, we'll have to continue another time. Tara's studying for the LSATs and she goes to bed at ten thirty these days. If I'm not there by then, she won't let me in."

But Shokare and Wome took up their conversation at a different point, and in a bar, on DeKalb Street, which was not quite Fort Greene. A tiny room at the bottom of jagged steps bare but for three blood red vinyl couches. The doors had been pulled wide but this made no difference. A clammy, motionless torpor lay across Brooklyn.

Shokare wanted to know, "Are you actually Nigerian? I hate to ask, but your accent..."

"Cameroonian. But I went to secondary school in Lagos."

"Oh. Which one?"

"Clapperton College."

"I knew there was something Naija about you. Clapperton, eh? If my mother wasn't such an anglophile I might have been tormenting you since we were ten."

Wome refused the proffered cigarette. "You almost went to Clapperton?"

"My father wanted me to. Although he never went, it was good enough for him. Or perhaps because he didn't. But not for my mother." Shokare assumed a querulous voice, "My son is going to UK. No ifs ands or buts.' So I got sent to a super expensive school in Hertfordshire."

"We might not have met. Kunle went to Clapperton. He says he remembers me but I didn't recognize him."

"For a foreigner, it must have been rough."

"It wasn't bad."

"But why'd you choose to go there?"

"I didn't. It came down to Achimota in Ghana and Clapperton and my mother thought Ghana was too far."

"S'funny. My mother insisted I go to England because she felt the education in Nigeria was slipping but it doesn't seem to have hurt you."

Wome thought of Marguerite's reluctance to send him to Europe and wondered what sort of woman Shokare's mother was. He let a little time pass before he said, "How are we alike?" He hoped to take Shokare by surprise.

Shokare looked pleased that Wome raised the subject. "Well, I noticed you didn't say a word, not one, at that barbecue."

"So? What does that mean?"

"You've got doubts. There's no golden future all laid out in front of you."

"Is that all?"

"That's plenty. Everyone nowadays seems to know what's in store. Or at least what they believe. Kunle, Tara." Shokare's arm swept up. "Look around you. New York is chockablock with people who know exactly how life should be."

"That bothers you?"

"Not necessarily. I just... Ok, it bothers me. We Africans don't have an answer to capitalism so we buy it, along with all the other shit, aesthetics, pop culture, they've foisted on us. But they take nothing Africans came up with. Nothing! Even India, poor as it is, gets respect because of Buddhism, the Bhagavad Gita. Westerners flock to ashrams to find nirvana. Which African philosophy draws Western adherents? But there's lots of things the West can learn from us."

"Like what?"

"Well, not to romanticize village life, but some things worked well in the old days. And what about our own culture, our languages? We still value education while the U.S has got an anti-intellectual streak a mile wide." Words tumbled out of Shokare's mouth. "When I was six or seven, we had this expression, 'American fockin shit.' It doesn't really mean anything—but it summed up for us what the U.S. was about, you know. Somehow even as kids we were aware of how over the top this place was."

Wome said nothing. He was trying to come to grips with what Shokare was telling him. He had never thought about these things. Shokare laughed as at some internal joke and said, "I'm going to write something to bring down this sham of a country." His eyes were drawn down in a scowl but Wome noticed his lips twisting as though these arguments were not entirely persuasive even to himself. "It's an octopus that's latched suckers onto all of us." Shokare wagged a finger and Wome stifled a laugh as he leaned in. "Hip hop, Wome. that's the new imperialism. Stealthier than we've ever seen. I won't live in a world kinged by people named Big and Puff." In a normal tone, he went on, "People like you and me, we

understand our own societies and Western ones too. But the West can't critique itself. Fromm is right." Shokare did not appear to care that Wome made no response. He sat back on his stool and lifted his glass halfway to his lips but it was empty and he replaced it on its coaster. Despite his hot, darting eyes, his face remained dry even as Wome's temples prickled with the beginnings of perspiration. For a moment, Wome was seized by a blinding conviction Shokare was mad but he pushed it away. He and Shokare were no longer the only patrons in the bar and an unshifting thundercloud of cigarette smoke palled the air above their heads.

They got up to leave and just at that moment Christopher came down the small flight of steps and entered the bar. Wome came up and greeted him. Christopher seemed distracted; he peered about and said few words then as he shook hands with them, he offered Shokare a cautious raise of his chin.

Around the corner, Shokare said, "Your boy's meeting some titi and didn't want you around." He did not look at Wome. This seemed unlikely and Wome instead connected Christopher's curtness to Shokare's presence. The evening had given up some heat and Wome took quiet pleasure in traversing Brooklyn and noted its differences to Manhattan. Uneven, uptilted flagstones and the nighttime clotting of shadows beneath the canopy of trees on smaller, residential streets. They passed a basketball game, a flail of arms illuminated by amber streetlights. Wome stretched his own fingers, smiling at the trash talk. He'd never mastered the palming of a ball.

At Fulton Street, they came to an abrupt halt and Shokare turned to face Wome. His eyes were hooded in the poor light. He said, "Familiarity breeds contempt. I'm going home tonight." They shook hands and Shokare went with brisk strides toward Bedford Stuyvesant, leaving Wome to wonder if this contempt were apt to attach to Shokare or Tara. Bedford Stuyvesant remained for him a name with neither meaning nor association. He knew where

it lay but had never ventured in that direction. He went now down the incline of Fulton Street toward its intersection with DeKalb Avenue. The lights in Fort Greene had begun to waver and dim. From one street over came a murmuring music and Wome imagined he could hear hushed, huddled voices. Halfway down the block he looked in at *Keur Pape* but there were no patrons in the cramped Senegalese restaurant. There was a wakefulness in Wome, a kind of excitement he couldn't account for and he was still thinking about the things Shokare'd said as he unlocked his door. However by the time Wome pulled the covers over his head, his mood had been overtaken by wakeful nostalgia.

*Pere accompanied Wome to Lagos to begin secondary school. Wome's leave-taking appeared, in his own eyes, more humble than Kab's. She had returned to boarding school in France two weeks before. At the airport she offered Wome pithy advice: "You'll get into fights, of course, but don't fight too much if you can help it." Kab had too much savvy about violence.*

*Wome was reading Winston Forde's "Air Force Cadets," a gift from Maman. His trunk and other bags had been stowed deep in the bowels of the bus. Next to him sat Pere, his glasses clinging to the tip of his nose. His book, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* elicited frequent quiet grunts as he read. Three hours after the bus left Douala, Pere, "Your mother and I expect your adjustment to go more easily than Kab's. Lagos is not so different from Douala." Wome smiled but said nothing. He did not blame any one but he was unwilling to be impressed by Lagos.*

*It was not at first apparent, over the border, that they had passed into a different country. The people Wome saw resembled Cameroonians; their clothes were no different and the pidgin was more than intelligible for it did not seem different from what was spoken in Bafut.*

*For Wome, entry into Port Harcourt signaled his arrival in Nigeria. The city was beautiful and full of hurrying Whites and self-important Nigerians. Then, they met Lagos with startling alacrity. It was vaster than even Pere had envisaged, its boundaries sagging against the littoral. Brackish, stinking water glared*



from the city's orifices. None of the other passengers showed any wonder at the size of it. In fact most were asleep.

Clapperton College was situated in a neater quarter than any Wome had yet seen. Tall, whitewashed walls affixed with glass shards denied views of the buildings beyond. Sweepers were at work in the streets. "This is a good area" said Mr. Chidioka, the man on the seat in front of Wome and his father. He spoke with a stutter. He insisted on shaking Wome's hand in congratulation, excited as if his own son were going to Clapperton.

The school gates had been thrown open. On the sidewalks vendors waited and loitering pupils too, in their short-sleeved uniforms. Touts were directing drivers into berths. A porter, already floured with dust, slung Wome's luggage onto his trolley and hustled off, bellowing, "Oya, oya, clear de way." The air was heavier and more rank than in Douala.

In Wome's boarding house, Fokutu, were already many boys and richly dressed adults. The porter was now nowhere in view but Wome's bags lay just inside the main door. Wome felt the unsteadiness of excitement and fatigue come over as he gave the prefect his name. He'd begun to long for his own mattress at home in Douala.

The boys of Class 1B were quartered in a box of a room. Parents and pupils glanced up from unpacking to take the measure of each new arrival. The best beds, those in the corners, had been quickest taken. The floor was cold stone, dusty; mothers eyed it with disdainful sniffs, their eyes spoke of brooms. There were only two windows, neither large. The dormitory rang with fathers' roars of greeting and the flurry of feverish tidying away. Already, Fokutu's interior was squalid with the day's heat. Of the three beds that remained, Wome chose the one offering slim advantage: it was not too near the door, and yet close enough perhaps to the window to catch some breeze.

He felt too agitated to unpack and wished his father would say something to comfort him. He was tasting his first homesickness, mixed with the dregs of disappointment over missing out on Europe. But Pere was aware of how brief his time in Lagos would be and he went out, telling Wome to waste no time getting

*acquainted with his classmates. Pere did not return until the evening. His arms were trembling as they went about his son and Pere's eyes shone with tear that were not tears of farewell. Wome felt jealous and too angry to cry. He resented his father's joy. He was about to be left behind in a strange place full of bull-voiced men and rough-eyed boys with no certainty of ever achieving great height.*

## July

For Wome, Atlantic Avenue subway station called to mind battered postcards from childhood: *La Gare du Nord*. Waterloo. The ceilings were not so high, the train cars ordinary-sized rather than massive but the excitement contained in the long corridor-like spaces, the urgency of goings and comings was palpable. Virtually every subway line in the city stopped there, offering escape.

The inertia of long office days and dun, sunlit dusks in the too-warm rooms of his flat goaded him to put his evenings to use. On foot, Wome crossed Atlantic Avenue and breathed in unknown scents. Over here there was none of the feel-good blackness of Fort Greene. Climbing the hill of Flatbush Avenue, he met instead a funeral house, wine stores, a poky second-hand book store, a Greek restaurant. At the summit, the arch coaxed him on into Prospect Park but he did not go far. Open space seemed alien. Surely, The shrubbery and too-green grass had been transplanted from somewhere like Florida.

The next time Wome wandered deep into the park. Skipping from the path of joggers and skaters, he could feel the twilight lowering across Brooklyn. As though he knew it would be there, Wome came up to a game of football. Players ran and harried over the uneven ground. They were West Indians from their accents. They kept up a stream of chatter: berating a man for letting the ball slip through his legs or laughing over a misplaced pass. A man with thick, short dreadlocks came and stood next to Wome as he swatted at gnats.

"You playin?" He lunged, limbering up.

"I don't have any clothes with me." Wome looked at his shoes as if to assess their suitability.

"You can play just so." The man exposed tiny, even teeth to show he was teasing. "I need one more to get in." He pronounced it moor. All at once, he raised his voice. "Hey Duncan, come siddown, nuh. Gi' me a little game." But Duncan only waved from the middle of the field. "You Africans only play when you have a full kit, eh?" The stranger no longer smiled but his eyes were merry.

Wome did not like his tone. "How d'you know I'm African?"

The question caused some amusement. "Y'all too serious, man. See how we play. We talk, we laugh. I never see any Africans smile when they does come to play."

Another day, a Thursday, Wome took the B train toward Brooklyn's heart. Lanre had told him there were African stores there and on Flatbush Avenue, he encountered jut-jawed, bustly Nigerian women marked out by their English-strewn Yoruba and bleached faces. They were, Wome supposed, Odu molls.

The names of the Senegalese hair boutiques had been spray painted on the windows in red, green and black: *Keur Khady* and *Keur Fatou*. In the tiny, neon interiors hung stained, asymmetric mirrors and shabby colorless wallpaper had begun to peel away from the walls.

In *Keur Fatou* Wome noticed a slim, dark woman a year or two older than himself with hair worked into thin shoulder-length plaits. However Wome tried to catch her eye, she never looked up. He dared not go in—there was no reasonable pretext he could think of to enter—but passed the salon's threshold once, again, even a third time. The suety woman whose hair was being twisted watched him with expressionless curiosity, but Aminata—Wome felt certain this was her name—did not lift her chin and at last he went on his way. It was difficult to loiter on Flatbush Avenue.

As he walked he thought of Shokare's ambivalence. At every opportunity, the Nigerian used this word *acata* despite having an African American lover. His attitude toward African-Americans seemed at odds with his stance at the barbecue about Africans going home but he suspected Shokare would not recognize any contradiction if Wome pointed it out.

On the train that took him back to Fort Greene and the melting heat of his apartment Wome conceded a woman like Aminata, beautiful as she was, would not ease his loneliness. What would the two of them find to talk about after they made love? In fact, Wome did not know what one said to one's wife after twenty or even thirty years, whoever she was. It was difficult to imagine himself with an African American woman. The ones in church made him tongue-tied with their bold eyes. And what of Amanda, who's gaze still followed him? In this at least, Shokare was right: American women were a mystery.

*On his first afternoon at Clapperton Wome lazily put away his things, trying not to stare at other boys' possessions. As the day drew on, parents left one by one and it was a relief to see none of the mothers shed a tear. Each father, stern-faced now rather than jovial, offered the same meaningless advice, as he quit the room. "Study hard and fly right."*

*And then in alarming waves, Class 1B received visits from the members of forms two, three and four. The Form two boys were absurd. They swaggered like corsairs and made much of the inch or so of height they had over the newcomers.*

*A boy with scarred cheeks stood in the middle of the dorm room. "Welcome. Just because you are here does not mean you are already part of Clapperton. That distinction must be earned. We are more senior boys so consider us your teachers also. We don't expect you to jobale but where you are concerned my name is brother Tolu, not Tolu. And never, ever, ever refuse any request made by a more senior boy." When brother*

*Tolu led form two from the room, some of Wome's dorm mates allowed their faces to break into smirks.*

*Wome felt more than ever aware of his own stature, of being a foreigner.*

*In a matter of weeks Wome knew form sixers were the real powerbrokers of Clapperton, assuming powers that had not been extended by teachers. Other forms treated authority as a pie to be sliced into ever-smaller slivers. Teachers and housemasters refused to soil their hands with petty matters, reasoning that non-intercession made the lives of junior pupils more tolerable.*

"So, how's your rabble rousing friend?" Kunle leaned his bulk in so that he would be heard. It was a little after seven o'clock in the evening and The Shark Bar was empty but for the three of them. It was at Kunle's insistence they had come uptown.

The long bones in Wome's face went flat. "Who?"

"That Bendel boy. The one from the barbecue."

"Shokare. He's fine."

"He went to Fordham, I hear." The jazz band onstage appeared not to mind playing to an audience of three and the brassy tune they were playing made conversation difficult.

Christopher brought a cigarette to his lips with his thumb and forefinger. "So what did you two talk about?"

"Marketing." Wome found that he was enjoying the little silliness. Then he remembered a detail. "Who were *you* meeting there?"

"Me? Just a friend."

Kunle noticed Kunle's reticence and took up the thread. "A friend, eh? "You don chop action?"

"Ah, Kunle, why do you care, despite? She's not your sister." Kunle laughed, licking beer from his top lip. A propos of nothing, Christopher said, "My cousin Osei just got the first new five series in Accra."

"Ah, sweet car. I'm sure those ones sold out in Lagos in a few days."

Wome's mind was spinning. Shokare's guess about Christopher had been correct and even now as he glanced up the Ghanaian was watching, eyes unblinking, from across the table. Wome pretended to pay attention to the music. Kunle beckoned them both forward, the gape of his mouth cavernous beneath the black lights. "I think my colleague at work was playing a trick on me when he told us to come here. Let's go, *job*." It was true: there were no women as Kunle had said there would be. No one in fact except for two drunk old men slouching before the stage. One of these began to perform an intricate little jig; he was sprightly and kept on his feet no matter how he lurched. Wome wanted to get a better view of him as they left, this man at once admirable and comic, but his face was averted.

The Upper West Side was a shallow bowl exposed to the night sky by the relative absence of skyscrapers in this part of the city, although it was no easier here to see stars. The small shops selling whimsical or workaday items reminded Wome of Brooklyn. Kunle went East at Seventy-second street and Wome continued with Christopher to the downtown red line.

As they stood in the littered, empty subway car going south, Christopher said, "Quite devious the way you changed the subject earlier." Outside, a light flashed once down the tunnel like a spark of electricity.

Straight-faced, Wome replied, "I'm sure it's Shokare's influence." Christopher looked at Wome's face with an impassive, considering expression. Before the train entered Cortland Street station Christopher began to move toward the door. "I have to go back to the office." He did not say *Chale* as he often did, affectionately. "You marketing types are lucky. This M&A stuff is killing me." The touch of his palm against Wome's was concise, almost a grudging contact. But it was the putdown about marketing that lingered. For Wome it was

reminiscent of Shokare, who, Wome knew, would have confected an immediate and withering retort.

At home, a voice message was waiting for Wome; it had been left minutes earlier. He recognized Shokare's voice, reciting an address, train directions. He sat on the bed and listened a second time. If he stayed at home he'd fall beneath the spell of a nostalgia that, in the morning, would be indistinguishable from dreams. He forced himself to get up and go out.

"Yeah? Block this." Alex wagged the joystick as though it burned his fingers. He spoke very fast, with an accent more English than even Shokare's sometimes was. Wome put his age at sixteen and wondered who he was. Segun's fighting style was less frenetic, but then he appeared to be losing the fight. It was hard to follow the blur of onscreen punches and feints. From the white, faux-wood speakers came the sound of Fela yowling. Wome's bare forearm was sweat-glued to the greasy plastic sheet covering the sofa.

Shokare eyed Tope count his money, half his attention on the video game combat. Tope had opened the door to let Wome in; Segun presumably was his roommate.

Segun, worsted by Alex, punched now at the remote control with a fleshy thumb and switched the channel. "C'mon," Alex held up his controller. "I'm not finished with you yet."

"C'mon Segun, lemme beat him, *job*." Shokare joined in. Sucking his teeth, he said, "Do we have to watch this hip hop shit?" On the television a squat man with a bandanna fastened about his head was snarling unintelligible words.

"Na drinking petrol whey make 'im voice like dat." Tope continued sorting notes. His lips appeared to have been peeled raw; they were an obscene, startling pink, like flayed flesh. Wome resisted the impulse to stare.

"Ah beg, spare us the anti hip hop lectures," Segun shook his head at Shokare. In Segun's hands now were rolling papers and marijuana. Segun was stocky, with treacherous, long-lashed eyes. Wome noticed the bulbous ersatz jewel of his pinkie ring. Or perhaps it was real. "You dey for America, man. Adapt or go home. How many people in *Naija* would kill to be in your position?"

"What's my own for America." Shokare kissed his teeth again. "Ah beg, Wome, increase volume small."

"It's too hot for Fela." Tope switched off the CD player, offering Shokare an unlit rolled cigarette. Wome agreed but said nothing.

Shokare kissed his teeth again "You wan' bribe me with *igbo*?"

"Spark it, man" Alex yawned. "Stop whining."

After his turn Segun handed Wome the loose crumbling cigarette. "You *yak igbo*?" The exhalation of smoke through his nostrils was itself an expression of skepticism. Wome passed it on.

As if roused by the marijuana, Segun began to berate Shokare, "This Fela, Fela, Fela all the time, Shokare. Ah ah. When in Rome, oh. America na hard place. If you can't play the game, I beg just go back to Lagos. You're an educated brother, I'm surprised at you." The joint sketched another circle, during which Shokare made no response.

They left the apartment. Tope and Segun lived on a lurid Flatbush block, the entire population of which seemed bivouacked on the street to avoid the heat indoors. Shokare drew Wome aside. "So what d'you think of those two?" He pointed with his chin at Segun and Tope. Wome shrugged. "I mean, have you sussed out anything about them?"

"Like what?"

Segun and Tope were quarreling about using the car. "Fashi," Segun said. "We'll never find parking and I'm not wasting fockin twenty bucks on a car park." The car was a



battered Toyota with a curiously unsullied interior. Segun drove despite his opposition and Shokare sat next to him, which allowed Tope to roll another joint in the back seat. Gregory Isaacs played on the car stereo and loudly enough to inhibit speech.

"Na odu money," Shokare told Wome and Alex when they were across the bridge and had left the car on a smelly little street near the Bowery. Above the door of the bar Tope led them to a sign said Happy Fun in stylized Chinese script.

Segun and Tope were sipping now from champagne flutes. Wome watched from behind as Tope made a show of pulling grimed bundles of twenties and fifties from his pocket. The lavish tips he doled out drew no response from the buxom bargirl, although this show of indifference was maybe calculated to up the ante.

Curiosity got the better of Wome and he turned to Alex. "Is it your first time here?"

"First time anywhere, really. Been to Wales and Calais but this is me first real trip abroad."

"Do you like New York?"

"It's alright. Not that different from London really, New York." Alex fiddled with a soiled sweatband pulled up near his elbow that read Aston Villa. Race stuff's a bit different. White people here think black people are rough 'cause they're poor or whatever. In England, there's more contempt and not as much fear."

Shokare said, "You've only been here a few days; how do you know who's scared of who?"

"It comes across in the movies." Alex snorted as though preparing to spit. "In America, to be hard you've got to be big and muscly. Tough guys in American films are always like that. But in England skinny, tattooed bastards are the hard ones. They'll either head butt you or knee you in the balls and those wankers never go down when *you* hit them."

Neither Wome nor Shokare made any reply. Alex's matter of fact way of talking about violence reminded Wome of his sister.

Tope tired quickly of Happy Fun bar and got up to leave. As they walked back to the car, Wome heard the clatter of an orange line train ascending the bridge. He thought it curious there'd not been a single Chinese in the bar but now on the streets he saw very few whites or blacks.

In a nightclub near Varick Street, Hype, the *Odu* boys—as Wome had begun already to think of Segun and Tope—outdid their earlier posturing. Segun paid the seventy five dollars cover for all five and threw in an extra five after the bouncer's eyes lingered on Alex's running shoes. Wome remembered Segun's complaint about paying to park but no one made a comment.

The club had been constructed on the scale of a grotto but the atmosphere was not at all subterranean. Gales of almost cool recycled air spun through its recesses although the stuffiness persisted. In the unflattering light, women were red-mouthed harpies, their excitement altered by the strobes into tawdry, slow motion yelps. As at a peep show men, in collared shirts and slackened ties, stood rapt at the margins of the dance floor.

Tope handed over three tattered hundred dollar bills and received magnums of Dom Perignon champagne for Segun and himself. Segun insistently offered to buy three more bottles but Shokare said, "*Oga*, no worries. Alex and I prefer vodka and *dis* one here *na* sophisticated man." His hand came up to rest on Wome's shoulder. "Only wine he *dey* drink." Tope and Segun ignored the inelegant plastic flutes and stepped into the crowd, clasping the champagne bottles by their long necks. Despite his vulpine looks, Segun possessed no particular intelligence or independence and was plainly adjunct to Tope.

Shouting to be heard, Wome said, "So what exactly do Segun and Tope do?"

“Credit card scams, a bit of trafficking, stuff which allows you to live well and to swig Champagne like a lout, but often there’s nothing left when time comes to pay the rent.” Alex’s presence, perhaps, made Shokare sound particularly English. Tope was dancing with a woman in a miniskirt; he held the bottle above his head. “They’re young, a bit obvious,” Shokare went on, “But they don’t take themselves too seriously. They’ve never tried to con me they care about anything but money.”

The music had begun to change. the DeeJay spliced the hip hop record with a popular dancehall record, flowing one into the other. The sparer rhythm drew many women and they spilled off the dance floor, crowding others back. Wome stood nearly flat against a wall, He was enjoying himself but tried not to stare too hard at any woman. All at once, Shokare began to shepherd Wome and Alex toward the far end of Hype. The air spewing from vents could not mask the summer odors: perspiring bodies, the metallic almost-smell of vodka in glasses, even the heavy curtains, which gave off a dusty whiff of neglect.

The three of them swarmed through the bathroom door. Tope was exiting the last toilet walking almost on tiptoe. He winked but neither stopped nor spoke. Wome could still feel the stomp of bass in his feet but after Tope shut the door, the music fell away almost to nothing.

They bundled into the last stall. Segun was there, his legs straddling the toilet. In the confinement, Shokare’s voice was too loud. “You’ve actually got a fucking mirrored tray. How eighties.” Unsteady lines of powder had been divided out on the small tray balanced on Segun’s fingertips. There was a faint clinical smell, acrid and not unlike the headache pills Wome remembered in Nigeria. Alex accepted some thin item from Segun and helped himself to a timid sniff, nothing like Wome expected from him. But the second snort—in the other nostril—was businesslike and greedy. Alex offered the bank note, of indiscernible

denomination, to Shokare but he passed it to Wome and instead took the tray from Segun. Alex swiped at his nose; his eyes had begun to water.

An air dryer gushed to life outside and Wome wondered if their legs couldn't be seen beneath the truncated door. But Shokare steadied the tray an inch or so beneath Wome's nose, forcing him to attend. What remained on the mirror's face were drifts finer-grained than sugar and indistinguishable from a ground up tablet. Feeling cornered, Wome took in the faces around him. Alex seemed insensible to Wome's predicament and was gazing at the door as if he could see through it. Naked cunning showed in Segun's features, and curiosity. The earlier part of the evening, the failed trip to the Shark Bar to meet women belonged to another life. Shokare's eyes continued to urge Wome and it was obvious there could be no refusal. With a jerk, Wome brought the bank note to his nose. Shokare warned, "Gently. This no be snuff, o." But Wome wanted to get it over with and, ears still pricked for the heavy tread of feet, he ducked his head and took a measured snort. Motes of powder feathered his nasal passage a few instants and then the tickling sensation was gone. As he waited to see what might happen, Alex exited, and the door hung momentarily ajar.

Shokare took the straw from Wome and drew a pair of reverent sniffs, one with each nostril. "Finish it," Segun grunted.

But Shokare's palm came up in a gesture of refusal. He let out his breath as if it were some potent tobacco. "*Ombo*, I'm good. *Eshay, jar.*"

Wome left the stall feeling nothing but a persistent itch in his throat that did not go away no matter how many times he cleared his throat. He wondered if alcohol was delaying or dulling the drug's effects but had no idea what he should feel. In the main part of the club, Wome saw Alex looking self satisfied and began to push his way toward him when a hand poked him in the lower back. He turned to look at a slight, diminutive man with a shirt unbuttoned to expose a flat, childlike chest. He pointed toward the floor but Wome did

not understand and continued toward Alex. But he felt the jab of fingertips once more, higher and closer to his ribs and a voice filled his ear. "These shoes cost two hundred, dog, and you just mashed 'em."

Wome half-turned to face his antagonist again, feeling deafened by the music and bewildered by this insistent demand for his attention. His shoes were black and shiny, patent leather with thick laces. They resembled shoes Wome had seen on some New York police officers but he found it difficult to concentrate on the man's youthful hairless face or to heed his yapping voice. "Sorry," Wome managed at last, from a void.

"Yo, *acata* boy," Shokare tilted to bring his face near, catching Wome by surprise. Over the music his voice sounded crude, choked. "Fock off."

The man turned, puzzled. In the same moment, Alex's arm sidled across Wome's shoulder. In a hiss, he said, "Let me handle this. Relax." Wome froze and his silence was taken for assent. With a peculiar hop, Alex lunged forward so his knee prodded hard into the short man's groin, bowing his back and throwing his head forward. His lips fell open in a groan of intaken breath. Beneath the flare and swoon of lights it was difficult to gauge how quickly time flowed but Alex's knee thrust out again. Shokare swung Wome smoothly away and he missed what happened next. Around him, he heard dancers chanting along with the song being played. Wome glanced back over Shokare's shoulder, ignoring the Nigerian's prodding hand urging him on. Alex was no where to be seen but he thought one or two faces were trained on the floor.

They caught up with Alex in another part of the club. His eyes were tight. Shokare said, "Nice one, Alex. This is New York. He probably has a gun in his car." But he seemed distracted rather than fearful. Wome's fingers were still trembling. "Go and find Tope dem in case we have to leave in a hurry."

But it was not until two a.m. they filed down the exit ramp, Wome shivering at the motionless feel of warm air on his skin. Alex came first with his head up, alert but nonchalant; Tope and Segun made unsteady progress. Wome cast several looks over his shoulder but there was no one laying in wait for them outside Hate. In the Toyota's cramped interior, Alex flung back his head, laughter in some curious way directed at Shokare. On the back seat the odu boys slumped on other side of Wome like collapsed mannequins, instantly asleep.

Shokare called Wome to apologize the next day. "Sorry about last night. Alex can get a bit crazed with Charles." Wome laughed stiffly. "Anyway, how did it feel?"

"What?"

"The charlie. It was your first time, right? How was it?"

Wome seemed to realize he meant cocaine. "I didn't feel anything. What should I have felt?"

"Ten feet tall. Like the king of the world. But sometimes there's nothing the first time." Then, Shokare said in a peeved voice, "Look, Wome, I have to go."

Shokare thought for a moment after he put down the phone how easy it had been to persuade Wome to try cocaine. He forced himself to yawn, once, twice. It not yet midmorning. Then he walked down the short corridors, scuffing his heels, and into Teun's office. Teun wasn't there but William, Vanessa and Paulo were already seated. Vanessa was listening to William talk about a new laptop about to come onto the market. Shokare raised his eyebrows in salutation and pulled a chair up at the small table beside William, relieved to maintain a little distance between himself and Paulo. Vanessa's eyes flickered left and right but she never quite looked at Shokare directly.

Teun came in and sat close to Paulo, where a small space remained. Shokare had noticed how his boss encouraged the fiction he was merely first among equals and not the final arbiter. From an inside pocket Teun fished out a silver and red wand, a little shorter than a hand's length and almost as fat as three fingers. "So, we've not yet decided on a name for this thing." He placed it theatrically in the middle of the table. "We have three choices but no clear favourite so it's come to a straight vote." He looked around the table with sharp, dry eyes. Shokare wondered if he'd come directly from the bathroom. "Unless someone's had a last minute brainwave. Okay, so we vote....three points for your first choice, two for your second and so on."

Tiny slivers of paper came round and there was a subtle jostling on the table for elbow room as if for an examination. Shokare though sat back. He knew how Vanessa, Paulo and William would vote and did not care who saw what he himself wrote. But he guessed it would discomfit the three underlings that he was so at ease.

Teun too was enjoying himself. William tapped his pen against his wrist; he hated tension and invariably tried to agree with Vanessa. Yet the outcome of this exercise in consensus would be complicated by a recent development, the flirtation between Vanessa and Napauleon, as Shokare dubbed the quick-tempered Chilean. Vanessa might choose to support Paulo to signal her new affections. And yet, she was the only one who opposed Teun's ideas so Vanessa had a reputation for wilfulness to maintain. Shokare grinned as he plotted these intrigues. He'd not yet put pen to paper and Teun, smirking still, raised an eyebrow at him. For a moment, Shokare imagined himself and the Dutchman as co-conspirators but this was farfetched. The analogy of a dysfunctional family fitted more closely and was more apt than any classroom scenario. Teun's tactic of playing one adjunct against another was the behavior of a patriarch rather than a teacher. Although it was not obvious to Shokare what role he himself held in the family.

At last, Teun gathered in the papers and tallied the scores. Vanessa went out and returned with five valedictory cups of coffee and Paulo and William tried not to glare at one another. So, Shokare thought, William too has observed the growing closeness between Vanessa and Paulo.

"We have a name," Teun announced. He had not stopped smiling once but he became positively smug with pleasure after riffling through the results. He allowed himself a sip of coffee. "We can now properly begin to think about how to brand KitchenMate."

There was muted reaction to Teun's not-quite announcement. Shokare recalled that KitchenMate had been suggested by William to tepid response. Shokare's lip twisted in furious calculation as he tried once again to account for the result. Teun put the slivers of paper in his pocket. It didn't add up and to judge from their faces, Teun's three assistant directors shared Shokare's doubts. William looked as if he'd been exposed trying too hard at something. When she thought no one was looking, Vanessa smiled an apology at Paulo whose face had regained its characteristic expression of congested rage. It didn't add up.

At the rear of *Boulot Dodo*, a Soho bar crammed with Europeans one torpid evening Wome, Shokare and Guy were bickering about colonialism. "I agree, we should repent for Leopold and Lumumba but if Zaire's fucked now, it's not our fault," Guy shouted. He was Belgian and wiry, with unruly blond hair. He reminded Wome of *Le Petit Prince*.

"Repent?" "Give us free, more like," Shokare shrieked his indignation. "Debt relief for all. And hand back all the stuff you carted off to Europe, bastards." Guy was deeply drunk and thus unsure if Shokare were merely ribbing him. But he was given no chance to answer. Shokare thrust out his chin to indicate that Guy and Wome should look where his own eyes were trained.



Tope, without Segun, was even more vulgar, perhaps hoping, Wome supposed, to redress the lack of a partner. Tope's summer slacks were well-cut but the elegance of these was undone by the fact of his collared shirt being unbuttoned nearly to the navel. "Shit, Christ could actually have hung on that cross," Shokare observed. It was almost half a foot in length and nestled in the runnel of Tope's distended abdominal muscles. The crucifix was too tawdry a yellow to be gold but Wome felt certain it was. "And when does he find time to work out?" Shokare addressed no one in particular. He'd become distracted by the woman talking to Tope. She was of similar height with him, but the parallels ended there. She managed Tope's leers without frostiness, but there was something remote about her fresh face and the tight casque of her Afro. "Look at dat woman's mout. It don finish if dat mout touch ya *toto*." Switching accents, even personas, Shokare added, "I can't let Tope have that girl." He moved off.

Guy demanded of Wome, "*Il disait quoi?*" But Wome could think of no French slang words for penis. Shokare formed a triangle with the cool-faced woman and hot-eyed Tope, who made room with obvious reluctance. A shy smile came over Shokare's face and Wome knew Tope stood no chance.

Guy became distracted and not because of Shokare's maneuvers. The Belgian irritated Wome with his repeated glances toward the door. Wome felt relieved to let the conversation lull when Guy finally saw what he'd been looking for and raised his arm in greeting. Two women in dresses were shouldering a way through the press and the brunette too gave a small wave. her lips formed a natural pout but she seemed to be sucking in her cheeks to increase the effect. It did not take Wome long to notice that she simpered and the cheeriness of her voice irked him. She was called Isabel. The blonde woman was angular, her flushed face arrayed of planes and angles, and aloof. She made no attempt to ingratiate herself as Guy took her hand. Her name was Sabine and her eyes rounded when Guy

presented Wome in French. Then, Guy eloquently turned his back, making clear his interest in Isabel and signaling to Wome that he should keep Sabine company.

Wome splayed his right hand out nervousness. For one hysterical instant he feared his French had become too poor for him to make conversation but the thought was absurd. In the next moment however, he was tongue-tied over how to begin. He risked a glance at Sabine, whose mouth quirked without quite smiling. He thought her face altogether shrewd rather than friendly although in that moment, she was looking not at Wome but into the furthest reaches of *Boulot Dodo*. Her attention rested no more than moments on any particular face or object.

Wome began to worry she might move off in boredom and so opted at last for the failsafe. In formal French, he asked, "So where are you from, Sabine?" and moved a step nearer to be heard.

"Montreal." Sabine ran artful eyes over him. "Why so polite?"

"I assumed you were French." He didn't know if he intended this as an answer to her question.

Sabine responded with the same formality. "What is it you do in New York?"

"I work for an advertising firm. And you?"

"I'm an interpreter. At the U.N. Its not bad but you need to get away from U.N types every so often and spend time with normal New Yorkers."

"I haven't met any normal New Yorkers." She signaled faint amusement although Wome could not say how she did so. "What is it you want to get away from? At the UN?"

"Long pointless speeches. Translating those always seems such a waste of time. I'd like sometimes to change the words and make them more interesting. No one would notice though." Sabine growled a lion-cub laugh.

In English, Wome said, "But I'm sure you meet lots of interesting people from all over the world."

"Oh yes," Sabine continued in French. "Especially during GA sessions, the General Assembly, you know. It's a circus. But interesting?" Her shoulder-length hair swirled as she shook her head. "Delegates from Bhutan or Mozambique brushing against you in the canteen, assuming you're dying to warm their bed for a few days." She tinkled the ice in her glass and for moment refused to look at Wome.

Wome was wondering if some other meaning lay in her words. "Are you serious?"

Sabine clucked and pulled a face that implied he was hopelessly naïve. Then as if to cheer herself up she said, "And I hear it's ten times worse in the field offices." In the next moment she was flirting again. "Pity there aren't more men like you in the UN."

Wome did not know whether he was teasing as he said, "Maybe if I joined the UN I'd be one of these lecherous men." He'd never used this word before in conversation and studied Sabine to gauge if he'd pronounced it correctly.

"I doubt it. Have you been in New York long?"

And so they, Wome and Sabine, with nods and affirming sighs, lobbed questions at one another about their experience in the city, speaking in French and English by turns. Sabine's Canadian accent became apparent to Wome. Her deep voice and the polyglot din in the bar could not entirely disguise the muffled squawk that seemed to emanate from the bridge of her sharp little nose.

In turn, Sabine saw through Wome's intendedly drab replies and teased him without ever allowing herself a smile. Wome sucked at the straw in his glass to mask his amusement. But shouldn't she be laughing, he wondered, at my jokes?

Shokare came over now with the cool-faced woman—there was no sign of Tope—and new introductions were made. Sabine pretended not to notice Shokare give her a once

over as he shook her hand and her insouciance made Wome like her even more. The slim, big-eyed woman with the Afro gave her name as Magda in a voice gravelly like Sabine's. Her handshake was as arid as Wome expected and up close she was dry without dustiness or frailty, the pores of her face tight shut.

Guy and Shokare put their heads together. Sabine spoke to Magda and Wome and Isabel stood a little apart, as though neither quite belonged. In slangy French, Magda was explaining, "*Je suis d'Angola mais j'étais à Paris.*"

Guy was outside flagging taxis and Shokare ushered the group onto the seething sidewalk. Wome peered back indoors and caught an unmistakable gleam as one cab and then a second pulled to a stop. Tope stood at the window, likely watching them although an orange miasma from the streetlights stained the glass and obscured his face. The first taxi, which held Guy, Isabel and Sabine, began to pull away from the curb but Shokare too had turned back toward *Boulot Dodo* and he made a summoning motion with his fingers. The invitation though was insincere and Wome was not surprised to see Tope remain motionless. For a moment, it seemed he was looking elsewhere then he raised a slow hand with middle finger outthrust. Shokare shrugged, bland-faced and got into the cab beside Wome.

But in the midtown club to which Guy had taken them, Shokare did not savour his triumph. Magda and Sabine continued to chatter with the intimacy of old friends. When Shokare tried to lure Magda onto the dance floor they shooed him away. Wome stood near the two women, diverted by the sensation of having entered some millennial vault. The club's walls had been designed to seem insubstantial and the vitreous ceiling constructed in a cowled pattern, so that he imagined he stood within a lofty unclimated dome from the future in which nothing sharp-edged remained. Tables melded with the floor; in the interior of these floating light pulses bathed the semidarkness in tentative reds, deceptive green blues. Every surface offered the sere aspect, the facelessness of too-smooth plastic. Wome touched

the wall nearest him and found it emitted the humming almost undetectable warmth of a fluorescent bulb.

Around him were many Scandinavians, or people of Nordic appearance. The starkness of these tall men and women meshed with the white-lit asceticism of the space—it took a moment for Wome to remember the club's name: Silo. Guy had already entered the dance floor with Isabel and they danced to the sparse melodies without any self doubt. The contrast between Silo, or Seelo as Guy rendered it, and the club in which Wome snorted cocaine was further exaggerated by the efficiency of Silo's cooling system. To sweat here would be an achievement.

Sabine set down her tumbler, ready now to dance. She put her hand on Wome's arm and as he followed her, she shivered once in her thin, rippling dress. The androgynous, plinking music jarred Wome who had little confidence in his dancing. Enviously, he looked off toward where Magda managed to look like she was holding court even though no one stood close to her. Her lithe head bobbed perhaps not to any music. Shokare stood a short distance away, his feet planted as if he were resisting the impulse to hurry to Magda's side.

"Don't tell me you like her, too." Sabine's taunt drew Wome's attention back toward herself. For an instant he saw himself in Shokare, in the grip of a similar puppyish jealousy. But it had become an effort to think, and still more difficult to avert his eyes from Sabine's face. He'd lost track of how many drinks he'd taken, and alcohol or the conversation with Magda had aroused Sabine. In the ambiguous gleam the pupils of her eyes had turned violet, complicit and she took fluent, tiny steps in her inch-high heels, heedless of the music. Vodka swum through Wome's veins—Shokare had practically forbidden him to drink wine—and the alien music and ghostly lights bullied his faculties. In a daze, he danced nearer and nearer Sabine, forgetting his awkwardness but never quite putting his body in contact with hers. Until his excitement was too great and he scrubbed a hand across his face.

He asked, "I'm going to the bar; do you want another drink?" Sabine's eyes were briefly scornful. She shook her head and continued the intricate turns of her dance.

At the bar, patrons stood three deep, waving to catch the server's eye. He ministered to buyers arbitrarily or perhaps based on his own internal quotient. Wome looked over the heads of those in front of him, content to wait. He did not want another drink; he did not know what he might do if he were drunker.

When he felt a caress on his buttock Wome assumed Guy was playing the fool. He began to spin about even as an arm snaked across his waist, snagging him into an embrace. "*Tu viens chez moi, alors?*" Sabine stood on tiptoe to kiss the nape of his neck. Wome started—he couldn't help himself—and for an uncomfortable moment the two of them were the focus of sudden stares. Wome affected that it was simple ticklishness that had made him jump. With a short laugh, he faced Sabine. Her cheeks and throat were hectic and her eyes averted. Wome tried to sound nonplussed rather than indifferent as he murmured, "*On y va, alors.*" He took her hand. His mouth filled all of a sudden with saliva.

No one noticed their going and outside on the sidewalk they blinked at one another beneath the intrusive glare of the streetlights. After the diffused light of Silo's interior the night seemed if not brighter, but somehow immediate and consequential. A few taxis waited at the curb and Wome led Sabine to the nearest one. She gave the cab driver her address, "87<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam. Please don't take the West Side Highway." As Wome pulled Sabine almost onto his lap. Sticky, vodka laden lips bumped and joined. Wome resisted the urge to put his hands beneath her dress and concentrated on answering Sabine's kisses.

After no more than five or six minutes the cab came to a sharp stop. Sabine lifted her head and scrabbled at the door catch. Wome resented the cheapening need to break off and fumble for cash but Sabine disentangled herself, and before Wome had even put hand to wallet she stood outside the taxi and was proffering a wad of bills through the driver's

window. There was nothing to do but stumble blear-eyed into the foyer, chasing her clacking heels. He felt cheated that she had been the one to pay the taxi but saw no way to complain. Inside, a tall ersatz chandelier sent hostile darts of light into his eyes and blinded him.

Sabine's apartment was small and even from the threshold obviously a dogleg apartment. A strong smell of oranges filled the air. Sabine let fall her handbag and walked out of her shoes and entered the bathroom before Wome could tumble them both into bed. He shut the door and stood, foolishly unsure of what to do. In a new tone, Sabine hollered, "I'm coming. Go warm the bed."

So Wome went into the bedroom and took off his shirt and trousers. He left these on the floor but the fear of appearing overeager kept him from removing his under shorts. The bedsheets still held a comforting warmth from the noontime sunshine and he slipped beneath them. The window had been left open a crack and Wome pushed it wide to admit air into the flat.

From the bed, which took up considerable space, the apartment did not feel so oppressively small as on first impression. The ceilings were high and the dogleg gave some sense of modularity although Sabine's mirror hung in a position which allowed him, from where he lay, to see around the corner and into the kitchen. He counted four or five cast iron pots and skillets, and several long wooden spoons.

An intermittent noise came through the window from the streets, hooting cars and the lurching stop start squeal of northbound garbage trucks. It was certainly noisier than in Fort Greene, but perhaps this explained Manhattan's appeal, the perception that event and conflict, the lifeblood of any city were inexorably and repeatedly unfolding, often no further than one street away.

The tap in the bathroom continued to run. Wome wanted a drink of water but he knew the moment he got up Sabine would exit the bathroom and he did not want to be thought fidgety. Supine, Wome sniffed softly at his armpits then decided his posture—elbows above head—might appear complacent, even a little smug. He slipped his hands beneath his buttocks.

Sabine finally approached the bed and Wome had by now lost some of his twitchiness. She was wearing a long t-shirt which left her legs bare and her cheeks were pale and scoured. His excitement, which had begun to fade, now revived as Sabine bundled beneath the coverlet and pressed her body against his. She touched her lips to his mouth and his neck in brief chaste kisses that gave him no chance to reciprocate. Then she pushed her hand into his undershorts and with the sharp, precise motions of a few minutes brought Wome to a climax. He was still gasping as Sabine smeared ejaculate on his torso before snuggling close once more. Her breathing deepened and within moments she seemed to be sleeping. Wome though lay wide eyed, sticky and cooling, cringing at thought of his moans a few minutes before.

At six am, he felt differently. The night passed with him watching Sabine in a senseless, luxuriant sleep. But as he pulled on his rumpled shirt and trousers relief was uppermost in Wome's mind. He'd just met this woman and didn't know anything about her. He ripped a corner from a notepad in the kitchen and wrote out his numbers. Sabine's sleep seemed barely roiled by his sleeplessness or his getting up. He went out, grateful that her front door was of the type that locks without a key.

His phone rang at midmorning, as he was hunched over fighting sleep in his cubicle, thankful for the high walls. Shokare seemed irate. "Where'd you fuck off to suddenly? You took that Canadian sauce home, didn't you?"

Wome stalled "Why, what did Guy say?"



"She blows hot and cold, that Sabine. Thought you were getting your leg over, I bet? I saw her damn near purring in your ear at the bar." The nearness of Shokare's guesses made Wome lash back.

"How did things go with Magda? You seemed annoyed in Silo."

"Bastard. Get your own digs in, eh? That woman *na* one *kin'* tease. She put her hands all over me but she wouldn't let me kiss her the whole night. Two hours we danced like *oyinbos* to that fucking techno, then it's 'Okay, I've got biology at 10. I *af too* go.'" Shokare's accented falsetto bore no resemblance to Magda's voice. "Come and get me a taxi." He kissed his teeth. "Spoiled *nini*." "She probably has no idea brothers in New York can't get cabs."

Wome's day was tedious and unproductive because of daydreams, which veered in a different direction than his usual nostalgia. His mind kept returning to the taste of Sabine's lips and flesh, the unthinking way she'd slung her legs over his during the taxi ride, or snaked a hand inside his shirt. Don't get too excited, he chided himself. You may never see her again.

At home that evening, there was a voicemail message from Lanre about a lecture at NYU, which Wome erased. He felt too tired to go out. There was a second message though, left by Sabine and he listened to it twice. In a stern voice—a translator's voice—in which she bit off each word Sabine thanked him for an enjoyable evening without injecting sarcasm into the word enjoyable. In fact, it was the same tone with which she'd ordered him to go and warm the bed but Wome nonetheless felt satisfaction. He would wait a day or so before he called her back.

But there was neither need nor opportunity. Sabine telephoned him again the next morning in the office and without any greeting, asked, "Didn't you get my message?" Did he, she wondered, want to come with her to a UN party? The questions were both petulant

and aloof. Wome accepted her invitation but when he tried to make small talk Sabine rebuffed him. "I can't really talk now." And put down the phone. Hot and cold. Amanda's expression "fuckbuddy" also seemed suddenly very apt.

The telephone rang a second time as Wome was trying to make sense of things. It was Shokare. "Listen, Wome, there's a Jack & Jill thing on the upper West side tonight. Should be fun."

"Jack & Jill?"

"One of these *acata* organizations, for paper-bag colored people. Upwardly mobile niggers. They're into being black but not *tooo* black. Jack & Jill's for kids and Tara was a member in PG County, so I begged her to take me...us."

"Nonmembers are allowed?"

"Well, we can't sneer too much, and we'd both fail the paper bag test, but we're members of the African elite, how can they refuse, *job?* I'll just tell them my uncle's the *Oba* of Benin or some such." Shokare cupped a laugh into the phone. "*Acatas* are suckers for royalty as much as the rest. Meet us at 72<sup>nd</sup> street."

Wome found Shokare standing by the subway entrance, engaged with Tara in a semi-serious quarrel. He tried to enlist Wome to his side, "Tara doesn't want to take us anymore. She thinks we're only going to poke fun."

Tara pulled a face. "I didn't say anything about Wome. It's you I'm worried about." Wome was trying not to stare at Tara, who he remembered only faintly from the barbecue. She stirred up an unsettling longing with her brief skirt and her bright mouth. Tara's shoes made her taller than Shokare, but this did not appear to trouble him. He'd already noticed the effect Tara was having on Wome, and even passersby and he grinned wide with appreciation.

Tara walked between the two men, blithe to the attention men gave her long, strong legs. She did not seem well matched to Shokare. The bluntness of Tara's speech, the frank way she looked you in the eye lent her a toughness and glamour Shokare lacked with his shuffle and pugilist's sneer. It occurred abruptly to Wome Sabine might dress in a similar way to go to work, bright-stained lips and tall heels, and the image rocked him off balance.

In the nondescript lobby of the Milton Hotel on 80<sup>th</sup> Street, there were no signs posted to indicate any event was being held. The receptionist directed them down a carpeted corridor that wound toward the rear of the hotel to where, on a cheaply gilded door, a sheet of paper had been pasted. Shokare winced theatrically as he read the words written in cramped, spreading blue felt pen: Jack & Jill—Imparting middle class values to the wider black community. Tara thumped his shoulder and when Shokare tried to placate her she punched him again. Clutching his arm, he pushed open the door and walked into a small brightly lit conference hall with dirty-white walls. Two long rectangular tables had been run together end to end at the front and set out on these four pieces of paper bent into triangles with what must be the panelists' names in the same untidy blue scrawl as the sign. Talking and waiting on ranks of unyielding plastic chairs was an assembly of mostly women, many sitting at an angle to observe whoever might come through the doorway. "Husband hunters" Shokare muttered to Wome so that Tara would not hear.

There were no unoccupied seats so they hunkered against the wall at the back. Tara smoothed her skirt over her knees in vain. As he waited, Wome counted several earnest-looking, unself-conscious white women in the audience.

The room filled and then a side door opened to emit the panel—two men and two women—to a spurt of hand claps. First, was plump, yellowish Joanne Lebrun, a history professor from Louisiana. The audience then applauded Larry Saunders, a tall, rachitic man with freckles. Shokare made Tara frown by saying, "There are no attractive red niggers." In

his brief biography Saunders said he had trained as a civil engineer and now headed his own firm in Richmond, Virginia.

The Yale-educated government lawyer Paula Sampson was attractive and thirtyish. Tara jeered at Shokare, "No snide comments?" But he stared off into nothing, pretending deafness. 'You're more beautiful,' Wome wanted to tell Tara. If he simply stretched out his hand he would brush Tara's smooth brown knee. It was Sabine's fault, he reasoned, this unfocused lust that had begun to rear up in him without warning.

The keynote speaker, Melvin Skipper held the post of Linguistics scholar at Princeton then confessed, "I was never a member of Jack & Jill. We, my family, came from the wrong side of the tracks in Maryland." He turned to look at the man and women next to him. "So while y'all were dreaming of summers in Oak Bluffs and whatnot, I was swimming creeks, fishing, hunting for the pot." All four laughed, although unconvincingly. "My children are members though. and its a damn fine association." Skipper had a darker skin than the other three; he was deep brown, fox like in his movements and proportions.

"You should have brought Sabine." Shokare whispered to Wome. "The only thing that riles uppity black folk more than wilding ghetto nig nogs is good brothers crossing that color barrier."

Tara shushed him, "Shut the hell up, Shok." Niceties dispensed with, the discussion was beginning in earnest but the panelists' words filtered into Wome's consciousness as though through a door continually being opened and shut. He was sunk in his own thoughts and paid no attention to who was speaking at any moment as he planned how things must be the next time he saw Sabine.

".....it's undisputable that one unintended consequence of desegregation was the flight of the best educated African Americans from the ghetto, which deprived the less successful of role models and a source of inspiration."

Wome's glance strayed toward Tara. Was Shokare planning to juggle two women, Tara and Magda? On the slim evidence, Tara would not stand for it. And Magda seemed even more demanding. Not more independent necessarily but more self-centred. Surely, Wome found himself hoping, Sabine's personality resembled Tara's more than Magda's.

"The African American in the ghetto resents his suburban counterpart, envies his success and security and yet despises him for selling out, reneging on black solidarity in the face of a remorseless and divisive capitalist paradigm."

"And yet," another voice continued, almost seamlessly, "Life in the suburbs has been a sore disappointment. Gone is the inner-city communalism All black people once enjoyed, to be replaced by anonymity, isolation, looks of suspicion from white or Asian neighbours and always, always the mindless police harassment."

Wome considered asking Shokare for advice. But he and the Nigerian were unlike, he decided. What might work for Shokare would not for himself. He did not think Sabine 'blew hot and cold.' But he needed help to decide what to do. He knew Kah would say, 'be yourself' but he needed more.

The discussion rolled on at a lull and even Shokare settled in to listen. But an anticipatory tension remained over the room. The crowd expected something weightier, some intuition or wisdom which they could take away to share with friends or family. Stagnant summer air pooled in the room and at last the air conditioning buzzed to life. The panelists appeared to take this as some sort of signal and the floor was thrown open to questions. Stretching his legs, Shokare whispered, "Ahh. This is the best part."

A woman near the front stood up and said, "I have the fondest memories of my days in J & J. The club sheltered me from the harsh realities of the civil rights era. My best friends to this day are from Jack & Jill."

"There. We needed some trite gushing to get things started." Shokare looked to Wome to see if he agreed. Tara was scowling at both of them so Wome kept his face neutral.

"How do you navigate," a pudgy man in a double-breasted jacket wanted to know, "the couched and subtle racism that pervades academia, waiting to undermine an intellectual like yourself, Dr. Skipper, and how does it compare with the 'crabs in a barrel' syndrome so prevalent in the urban community?"

Shokare muttered, "There's a textbook example of reflexive paranoia."

"One of my favourite books is *White Boy Shuffle*. How would you deconstruct the protagonist's reverse trajectory from the suburbs to the ghetto and his success at assimilating to the latter. Also, what do you think the author meant Nick Scoby to represent?"

Wome missed the beginning of Joanne Lebrun's response because of Shokare next aside. "Ah hah!, I've been waiting to hear some pseudo-intellectual self promotion."

Shokare's disruptions were tiresome but even Wome became a little irritated at the question that came now from the front row. The man who spoke was young, with neatly tied-back dreadlocks. "How can we regain some of the ancestral spirituality we lost?"

Shokare's arm shot up. "Too many bullshit questions," he said in an aggrieved, too-loud voice. Tara twitched but she refused to look at him.

"Why does the black community automatically side with black men in instances of public conflict between a black man and a black woman? For example, Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, Mike Tyson and Desiree Washington."

"Now that was a good question," Shokare admitted, but his hand remained in the air.

As they deferred this or that query to one another, the panel members smiled, at once gracious and self congratulatory. The audience did not seem disappointed when awkward questions were sidestepped and still they came. "Does corporate America emasculate the successful black man, and must they conform to WASP values to get ahead?"

Wome's mind had begun to turn once more to Sabine so he did not immediately recognize Shokare's voice or that his friend had stood up. "I have two questions." Many heads turned at the English accent. "Three actually. Does Jack & Jill still use the paper bag test to screen members and how does this shade prejudice square with the organization's claims to be progressive? Is it not a concern that your sons and daughters graduate from the Ivy League but still aspire to a hip hop sensibility?" Shokare paused but remained on his feet, then he looked at Tara with a look that seemed to beg forbearance. She rolled her eyes but her lips shaped to form some amusement, not quite a laugh perhaps but certain amusement. Reassured by her response, Shokare went on, "And would you confirm, Mr. Skipper, whether you've had cosmetic surgery or were you born with that narrow, high-bridged nose?"

There was full silence rather than any gasps and after a moment one or two women clucked but whether with disapproval or disbelief, Wome could not tell. From the middle of the room an instantly muffled chuckle rose. The rumor apparently was not new. Skipper's equanimity though did not slip even as he stalled. "That was four questions." No one laughed.

Shokare said, "Ignore the last one then, it was facetious."

"The paper bag test, as you call it," Skipper spoke in a musing voice, "is no longer used, and was never besides a hard and fast yard stick. Admittedly, lighter skin was prized but that holdover from slavery has long been discarded." He blew out his cheeks, then changed tack. "As to your other questions, any medium, such as hip hop, that facilitates interaction among people can never be a wholly bad thing."

Shokare heard him out, letting a little time pass so that Skipper could continue but another voice broke the silence. "But it's middle-class children who are sinking to a ghetto mentality and not the other way around." Attention shifted from Shokare to the speaker, a

stocky, greying woman with a long strand of pearls double-looped about her neck. Shokare remained on his feet. He did not seem to know whether to be grateful or resentful of the interruption. "I think that young man has raised a very critical point. We must wrest back control of the images of ourselves that enter the public domain. Thugs do all of us a disservice by glorifying ignorance and violence." There was a sparse burst of applause from a few women about the speaker, but she had not finished. "Otherwise what's the point of affluence? "

There was another feeble show of support as Saunders said, "I don't think an us versus them mentality is helpful. Let's not lose sight of the fact we're all black in America, we *are* all African Americans. Or that ghetto life is harsh and demoralizing. Hip hop culture, in all its materialism and vulgarity, celebrates...triumph over the system."

The woman adjusted her glasses but she held her chin outthrust at a combative angle. "We *are* all black, Larry, but who's setting an example for whom? My son just graduated from U Penn, and what does he do? He goes to work for *Holla* magazine as finance manager. Rappers come into the office waving guns, editors get beat up but does he care? 'I busted my ass for four years, Mom,' he said to me, 'why would I want to go work 12-hour days for the man.' But who is the man nowadays?"

The panelists appeared to take the last question as rhetorical and did not try to make an answer. The crowd seemed restive and some people noticed food and drink being brought in and set up in one corner. Skipper began his closing remarks but was interrupted by a lone shout of "What about the nose job?" But no one took it up.

Wome went to pick over the refreshments, aware of Tara keeping her distance from himself and Shokare. Her back was turned and was engaged in conversation with two smartly dressed women her own age at the front of the room. Whatever she said caused her companions' eyes to swim over Wome and Shokare and dismiss them with blinks.



The woman in pearls came and plucked Shokare's elbow. "I appreciated your questions very much." Wome was nibbling on starchy morsels and sidled nearer to better overhear. But after a minute the woman turned a sudden smile on him and Wome guessed Shokare had been unresponsive. "Are you also from Nigeria?"

"No. I'm from, er, Cameroon."

"Ahh. You speak French?" Wome nodded, readying to feed her anecdotes from his childhood but she let out a sigh. "I wish I could persuade my son you two are the type of men he should emulate. You're about the same age but you could be a steadying influence, almost a mentor." Wome swallowed a dry bolus of pastry, hoping his eyes told nothing of his anxiety. "Lord knows, We, my husband and I, have done everything to broaden his horizons. We encouraged him to go live in Spain or Mexico for a year, learn Spanish. It's so good to meet articulate, educated men who aren't afraid to be intelligent." Wome felt an instinctual sympathy that surprised him and he allowed her outpouring to wash over him, glad there was no need to do anything but nod. He considered himself useless in these situations. He looked at Shokare, hoping to draw him into the conversation but the Nigerian had been joined by Skipper himself.

"I'm sorry, I haven't....my name is Melanie. Melanie Montrose." Her hand was dainty but by no means feeble. When Wome told her his own name, Melanie leaned in, at the same time perusing the room with keen eyes. One index finger was looped in her string of pearls. "I don't know why I bother with these.... functions. I don't have any patience with all this shade and hair business." She directed a sniff of disdain at Skipper and Wome could not hide his amusement. He suspected Melanie would get on well with his mother, language barrier or no. "And the younger members don't seem able to decide whether they want to achieve something meaningful or just wallow in lowbrow culture and mediocrity. I just can't see what the appeal of hip hop is." Just as Wome began to relax so he was no longer

standing at attention Melanie startled him again by putting a hand on his arm. "Don't misread this but I'd like to take your number. I'm having a dinner party in a few weeks and I'd love for you both to meet my son." Her glance washed over Shokare as if in reassessment. He was laughing heartily at some comment of Skipper's. The two men stood crosswise to one another and Wome had a strong suspicion they'd begun to critique the women in the room.

On a napkin, he scribbled his office number and told Melanie, "It's easiest to reach me at work." If she turned out to be a husband hunter he could more easily evade her. Melanie touched Wome's shoulder, then Shokare's in farewell but she ignored Skipper, who, to his credit, did not even notice. Shokare slouched with his hands in the pockets of his khakis. He had never seemed so gluttoned. It struck Wome that, in Skipper, Shokare recognized a kindred spirit, someone as sleek and glib as himself. During the short conversation between the two, which allowed no eavesdropping, an immediate rapport had sprung up that was evident in the frequency they looked one another in the eye. Both though would flinch from the notion that there was something homoerotic in the camaraderie of appraising women.

In any case, Wome knew he would not be welcomed by either of them so he went up to Tara and allowed her to introduce him to Olivier and Valerie, a pale couple who now flanked her. Olivier was as tall as Wome, or might be if he didn't stoop. His grip was tentative and he gave the impression of being barely sentient, as jellyfish or other species of drifting eyeless marine life are. Valerie's mouth was cruel and Wome realized it was her unseeing blinks that had passed over him. He half-listened to the reminiscences of these three. They seemed, rather than very close, to have known one another for a long time and to have moved in and out of one another's lives a great deal. Absently Wome picked over

his conversation with Melanie Montrose and at one point said aloud, in unconscious echo of the question she'd put to him, "So, you speak French?"

Olivier assumed Wome had addressed him. "No, actually. I'm from Louisiana. What do you do?"

"I'm in advertising." Olivier waited for him to say more, anticipating reciprocity but Wome fell silent. As they stood side to side facing out into the swarm, Wome admitted Olivier's passivity irritated him. From the other side of Olivier, Tara was watching Wome as if bracing for trouble.

The hall was emptying and Shokare came over, a pleased sneer playing over his mouth, and looked Valerie up and down. Ignoring everyone, he asked Wome, "So, was old girl a rich husband hunter feeling you out, or were you two comparing experiences of Brown?"

"You went to Brown?" Olivier yelped at Wome. Tara introduced Shokare to her friends as if she knew him only slightly. Valerie's smile fled before it had truly appeared.

"Yes. Why, did you?" Wome looked again at Olivier but his features were unfamiliar.

"I was at NYU." Sheepishness won out on Olivier's face. An inadvertent point had been scored but then Wome doubted Shokare's mention of Brown had been accidental.

"Nothing wrong with NYU," Shokare said, falsely cheering. "New York offers its own education. Can't get that in Rhode Island or Boston." A flicker of his eyes confirmed this was a dig at Wome.

"Where did you go to school?" Valerie asked, piqued by Shokare's cockiness. Tara narrowed her eyes.

Shokare said, "Fordham," which seemed to encourage Valerie and Olivier.

Relieved, Valerie said, "So, where are you guys from?" Shokare again made insolent eyes at her but did not answer.

"I'm from Cameroon." Wome resisted warring urges to laugh and apologize for Shokare.

"That's west, right?" Valerie screwed up her face. She seemed keen now to appear game.

"I've been to Africa." Olivier said, in a tone one might use in reference to Armageddon.

Shokare's curiosity flared. "Where?"

"Well, I was in South Africa, then I went to a couple of neighbouring countries."

"Which ones?"

"Eh... Botswana. No, it wasn't Botswana. Tiny countries. What are they called?"

"Zimbabwe?" Shokare mocked.

In the same moment, Wome said, "Swaziland?"

"That's it. Swaziland. With the king who..."

Shokare cut him off, not disguising weariness with the conversation. "Let's go to Noir." He made an appeal with his eyes to Tara. "It's Thursday; should be good."

Olivier and Valerie, who perhaps were not a couple turned to one another. It was plain what passed between them although they did not speak. Neither seemed eager to endure more of Shokare's malice but they were not yet cowed and, Wome suspected, they hoped to score points of their own.

They did not wait long for a taxi but the Nigerian cab driver refused to accept five passengers. Shokare browbeat him through the window. "*Oga*, why you wan' do your *brodda* like dis? No let America spoil you, oh." Before the man could protest further, Wome had been shoved in the front seat and the others bundled in behind him.

"Are you Nigerian too?" The driver—Chinedu was the name on his decal—asked Wome, punching the meter to life. In his rear mirror, he studied the men and women on the back seat as he muttered, "I no *sabi* again who be Black American and who be African sef."

"I'm from Cameroon," Wome told him. A damp wind buffeted his face and he rolled up the window. Shokare had begun to draw Olivier out in that way he had, which permitted little resistance. Tara stared empty eyed at the dark gleam of the Hudson River, glad maybe of a moment's peace.

At 34<sup>th</sup> Street, the driver left the West Side Highway and drove eastward. It was early land the cross-town traffic had not thinned. They got down at 27<sup>th</sup> street and Madison Avenue and without a backward glance, Shokare marshaled Olivier and Valerie, leaving Wome to pay the fare. As the cab lurched away, he saw Tara waiting for him and hurried to link arms impetuously with her. This section of Manhattan was familiar; his office was a few minutes walk North. The other three did not slow and Tara seemed disinclined to catch up so they walked, the only sounds the companionable clomp of Tara's shoes on the rough sidewalk.

They rounded a corner to see women in short skirts spilling onto the Murray Hill pavement. Inside Noir a straight-from-work crowd flaunted its long hours with shirt sleeves and pant suits. Wome's vision went foggy from smoke and candlelight cast long shadows and invested every gesture and motion with sinister meaning. Cognac swirled in the glasses of men who threw their laughter up to the ceiling and seemed to be ignoring the women drawn up in a phalanx at the back of room. These women pretended they cared little for the spill and roar of activity around them but one could almost scent anticipation.

"Interesting crowd," Wome said, wrinkling his nose at the cigar smell. Tara was looking for the others.

"Is it?" Her eyebrows soared above skeptical eyes. "The same people are here every week. I'm not sure why Shokare likes this place." Her eyes came to rest on Shokare. He was trying to buy drinks.

Wome had begun to find his own reticence tiresome. He wanted to tell Tara before the night passed that he was attracted to her. "Are you seeing each other?"

She seemed to sag. "Hmm, let's see. Kind of, is how I'd put it. It's nonexclusive so we can see other people. So *he* can see other people."

"You really like him?"

"Shok? He's difficult, but yeah, I do. He's willing to stand by himself. Don't let him rub off on you too much though."

"You think he already has?"

Tara ignored his question. Without transition, the subject of Shokare had become a painful one. Abashed, Wome looked at his feet, anywhere but at Tara. This was the problem with shyness. When at last you did speak, you were apt to say too much, push too hard and undo all the earlier work.

Not two metres away sat four men around a table, all burly in that way the affluent so quickly become. They slumped like pillows on their high stools and guffawed in each other's faces, tilting back their heads to exhale cigar smoke. Their faces were the color of milky tea and they resembled one another enough to be brothers or cousins but Wome, his nose wrinkling a second time, doubted they were related at all.

He tried to apologize but Tara had gone. To distract himself from embarrassment, he asked Olivier, "What was Jack & Jill like?"

"Aspects of it were good; others less so. The contacts I made have been very useful though." Olivier fell silent, diverted by the entry from the street of a striking woman. It took Wome a few heartbeats to recognize Magda as without preamble, Shokare broke off his

conversation with Valerie. Magda was squinting into the darkness, turning to and fro as if confounded by the raucousness and opacity of the atmosphere. She'd come dressed more simply than any other woman in Noir; She wore a long-sleeved Indian shirt and on her feet were casual leather slippers. But her artlessness was arresting and some women drawn up in a cluster left off watching the men and stared at Magda's Afro and her long, bare legs. Before Shokare could reach her, Magda passed close to Wome, still casting about and he gave her shoulder a quick pat.

"Wome." Magda said in French. "How are you? Where's Shokare? And Sabine?" They exchanged kisses.

Then Shokare was there. "Magda. I'm glad you came." A warm wariness came into his voice.

Magda smiled her most ravishing and hugged Shokare. "I don't live far. What is this place? I've never been here before." Shokare pushed dutifully toward the bar to get her a drink.

Olivier brandished his palm at Magda. "I'm Olivier,"

"Enchanté. Je m'appelle Magda." She pitched her voice over the clamor, craning her giraffe neck to hear, or perhaps so her cheek might be kissed.

Olivier shook his head. "I don't speak... No French." He gave her a solitary buss.

Magda's lips quirked a dismissal. She whispered in Wome's ear, "There are only Black Americans here?" But Tara now came back, smiling at Magda and then she went told Wome goodbye. She was going back to Brooklyn. Impulsive once more, Wome offered to share a taxi with her.

Magda pouted, mock sulky. "Ahh. You're going already? Leaving me alone with all these Anglophones." She held Wome in embrace a little too long. Stiffly she shook Tara's hand; it seemed an unspoken contract that perhaps only Wome understood.

Tara sat very still in the taxi, looking straight ahead. The distance between them on the unyielding leather seat made Wome feel like a cruel boyfriend. The questions and compliments that had jostled over his tongue all evening evaporated in the face of Tara's stony silence. He tried to think of something comforting and unthreatening to say but the taxi sped over the bridge and came to a stop in front of her South Portland Street stoop. Wome too got down and paid the driver, ignoring Tara's protests.

She faced him on the pavement. An undercurrent of tension like that of a first date had come up between them. In the dimness, Wome could not read Tara's face. Blood pounded in his head as he shut out thought of the cab ride with Sabine two nights earlier. "I'll see you around." Wome tried to make it a promise. Tara kissed his cheek, eyes sliding away from his. There was nothing more to say and he watched her go up her steps and unlock the door. He walked toward Lafayette Avenue observing how his shadow merged with those of gently swaying trees and thinking that in films men changed their minds and returned at a rush into the waiting arms of women.

In the living room of his apartment, Derek slouched watching baseball on television. His roommate talked at him in the ingratiating, insistent way of the lonely. By his feet he'd stacked three empty cans of beer. It seemed to Wome that, between himself and Derek, the tables had turned and he shrugged off the idea of taking his roommate out for a drink. The evening had left a sour, inexplicable taste in his mouth.

#### August

"So, this Jack & Jill, are you going to join?" Sabine asked. As they crossed 45<sup>th</sup> Street Wome's arm brushed hers. A city bus whined past on Second Avenue, trailing a scorched-fuel smell.



'Speak French,' Wome wanted to urge her. "No, it's an organization for children. It was a reunion. I only went to see what it was about."

"So, they don't like white people but lighter skin is better than dark?"

"Well, before you had to be lighter than a paper bag to join." To attempt further explanation was to become complicit in the absurdity.

Sabine looked at him. "Black Americans are strange, eh?"

"*Ouuuuii*," Wome drawled a noncommittal agreement, aware that even this represented a form of treachery.

They came to an Indian restaurant, Mughal Palace. In its close, dark foyer stood a many-armed sword-wielding Kali wrought of some pitted, matte metal and with one leg extended. Wome held the door for Sabine, as she said, "I know it doesn't look like much but the food's good." The restaurant was certainly more formal than Diamond of Calcutta but its dining room similarly lacked ambiance. The recessed lighting, meant to introduce a romantic aspect, was a source instead of eye strain.

After *bhajias* had been set between them, Wome asked, "Did I do something wrong? I mean, that night, in the taxi."

Sabine laughed. "No. I had my period. Actually, I thought you'd refuse to come home with me." She licked grease from her fingers before admitting, "but when you suddenly became all commanding, I went with it."

Commanding, Wome mused? "And now what?"

"I don't know. Maybe we spend time together. I don't expect you to marry me." She was laughing once more, and then without transition her face went serious. "What do you want?" He hesitated, a half *samosa* between his fingers. "Wome?"

"Nothing. that's fine."

"You need everything to be clear for you?" The question held no derision.

"No. I agree with you. It's better if things just flow." After a silence in which Wome supposed Sabine too was contemplating whether the two of them had reached an agreement, he asked, "So, whose party is it?"

"Hmm? Another translator, Ivana." Sabine smiled without guile, nothing now like the woman Wome'd met only days ago. Even the clothes she was wearing today, jeans and a simple top, helped demystify her. "It'll be good fun."

As they exited the restaurant Sabine lips grazed Wome's with a kiss that both sought and offered reassurance. Night had not yet settled. She took his hand. "Let's walk." The evening air was sticky against Wome's face, the atmosphere weighed down by greasy, torpid August skies. Rain had threatened the whole day without ever falling and now and again a rippling breeze carried the briny stink of the East River to Wome's nose.

He closed himself off from thoughts of Tara and said, "I wanted to invite Shokare and Magda but you didn't give me a chance on the phone."

"I'm not ready for them again so soon," Sabine laughed. "He acted like a jealous husband losing his grip, and Magda, she was enjoying it too much." There was a quiet, feminine pride in Sabine's voice.

Wome hoped he did not sound defensive as he said, "Shokare's shrewd. He can take care of himself."

"Hmmm." They stopped at a zebra crossing and Sabine faced him. "Not so shrewd as you think."

"You don't think much of him?"

"I don't know him." Sabine shrugged her indifference. "He seems vulnerable." More slowly, she kissed Wome again and he wondered if it were to shut him up even as a spasm crabbed across his loins. His grip on Sabine's palm tightened as they walked on and he felt foolish at how deftly she twirled and spun him.

Across the East River, but not far off, Shokare drank alone in a Fort Greene bar. He was waiting for a woman he thought of as a lover but feared was properly his girlfriend. Idly, his mind picked over the still clear memory of his first break up. He'd been fourteen and a fourth form student and he'd been seeing Claire Winter, a tall husky farmer's daughter. He'd blamed the break up on her parents. They would not, he protested, approve of him, a black African as her boyfriend. Claire was a day student so on Saturdays and Sundays at least he'd been spared the sullen, injured looks she directed him all through lunch and tea. Even now, if Shokare imagined himself married, it was often Claire he pictured.

He swallowed a gulp of wine. The door opened once, twice in succession and Tara's smile when she saw Shokare was like a hand closing about his throat. He hoped there was nothing of Judas in the kiss he gave her.

"It's hot as hell out there, Shok. Why are you drinking red wine?"

Now he'd settled on a decision, Shokare found himself falling for Tara all over again. He loved the drawn out consonants of her mid-Atlantic accent, which was neither a drawl nor so hard as a New York yawp. I should marry this woman, he thought. Those who wed young are the sensible ones. Wait until she's finished law school and then make her a respectable woman. "It is hot as hell. How's the studying?"

"It's going." Tara called out to the bartender. Shokare had chosen the fake pub with its spilled-beer smell and impersonal ambience precisely because it was not their favorite bar. It was at Frank's he and Tara had quarreled over the melancholy Danish film he'd taken her to see until Shokare eventually admitted it had been laborious if not necessarily pretentious. Frank's was the seedy sort of place where two people could discuss life choices, even each other without fear of eavesdroppers. 'You're bitter,' Tara told him when Shokare accused her of being too earnest. That had been at the beginning of an incalculable and moody

relationship that Shokare felt he should now unravel, for reasons that mystified even himself. Tara put down her drink and gave him a crooked smile. "So, let me guess. You think we should just be friends?"

"Excuse me?"

"This drink. This meeting. That's what you wanted to discuss, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Hmmm, a couple of things, Shokare. We never meet somewhere for a drink. You always come to mine first. And why here?" Tara surveyed the ersatz tavern. "Then you hesitated a little when you kissed me, as if you weren't sure you're allowed to. And *then* there was your little friend the other night. At Noir."

Shokare despised himself for the way he said, "Who?"

"The Afro Princess. Marta or Magda." Tara's eyes dared him to take her for a fool. "She wasn't there because of Wome." Her tongue snaked to snag a glacée cherry plucked from her drink. Tara's sexuality was never obvious, had never needed to be and Shokare had no doubt she was in some perverse way enjoying herself.

"What about Magda?"

"I could be studying right now, you know that, right? Do we really have to do this?"

"So you think this is about Magda?"

"You tell me. You're full of shit, Shokare." A little irritation entered Tara's voice. "But then I've always known that. I never really believed all the things you said about African women. 'Oh, they drive me to distraction. They're too conventional.'" She leaned her head to one side and then the other in rhythm to what she was saying. "They're so materialistic.' Its all coming together for you now, Shok. So are you and the Afro princess moving to Princeton?"

"Tell me why I'm a shit."

"I said you're full of shit. I don't think you're a shit. You know that. I like you. We've had fun."

"We've had fun but you'll walk away just like that? Back to your LSAT textbooks? We had a good time but bye."

She laughed with a sound Shokare didn't like. "What? You expect me to beg?" Tara's hand came to her breast. In a weepy voice she mocked, "Don't leave me, Shok. Don't leave me."

"You know, before you walked in just now, I was thinking... part of me felt I should just propose right now. Fuck law school and just get engaged."

"Fuck law school? Uh-uh. Law school's definite. But you sound awfully certain, Shokare. What d' you think I'd say if you proposed? I know you wouldn't actually get down on your knees but do you think I'd say yes?"

Shokare gave her an equally direct look. "You'd say yes."

"Hmmm." Tara's laugh was fonder, softer. "I might."

"Not might." It was his turn to shake his head. "Definitely."

"Actually, very much might. I *do* have other options, Shokare, other considerations to think about. Yeah, I love that you're your own person and all but you can't raise kids on that." Tara's self-satisfaction was no longer evident. "Plus, I'm not sure my dad would be so keen."

Outraged, Shokare demanded, "What? on me?"

"On me marrying an African." She was looking sidelong at Shokare. "Even one who talks like the queen, or thinks he does. You'd have to work like hell to charm him. But it's a moot point, isn't it. You're off to Princeton anyway with your Marta."

"What's all this Princeton shit?" The backs of Shokare's ears flushed with an irritated heat.

"Skipper. I saw the two of you chatting. What did you tell me that time, at mine? I want to be discovered, like a model." Taunting, she tossed her head. "You and Skipper seemed pretty friendly. I'm sure your questions impressed him. Didn't you hit him up for a job?"

"We didn't talk about anything like that."

"I'm surprised. He's an academic. At Princeton, no less. I'm sure he could have at least put you in touch with someone." Tara emptied her glass. "That was your chance, Shokare."

"I told you I don't have this American knack for self promotion."

"Well, you better hope the afro princess has it." Tara seemed on the point of laughter but her expression instead became grave. She studied Shokare's face and some mood or emotion came into her eyes that he found unendurable. He looked away. Tara let a little time pass before she said, "I'm going home." Wearily, she set down money for her drink beside her coaster.

Shokare watched her gather herself to leave. "That's it, Tara?"

"What, you expect us to be friends? To hang out platonically?" Neither of them quite looked at the other. It would be so easy, Shokare thought, to put my arms around her, to explain away the whole conversation as a kind of temporary madness, to let her see the wetness of his eyes. Tara stood up but made no move to leave. But at last when Shokare could summon no response to her question, she shot him a quick glance and, walking away, hissed, "You can't be that clueless, Shokare."

Far down on the Lower East Side, the streets became blurry and disordered. Young and old swarmed the sidewalks, eating, smoking; whole lives transposed out of doors. During the summer the loci of existence were building stoops, bodegas and street corners.

On Fifth Street, Sabine pointed out a mural. A Spanglish eulogy had been spray painted beneath the dark-eyed likeness of a murdered local gangster. In the background hovered a cloaked, gray-green Grim Reaper, whose covetous eyes lingered on the gold-draped hero.

They turned onto Loisaida Avenue and Sabine said, "Ivana's boyfriend, Manolo—he's Argentinean—swears Loisaida is just the way Puerto Ricans and Dominicans pronounce Lower East Side." Laughing, Wome tried it out a few times. Ivana's building was newer than its neighbours, a genuine high rise shouldered by pre-war brownstones. The foyer incorporated a hash of styles: glass and crumpled wrought iron and recessed lights.

The doorman looked up from his paper and guessed, "Party, right? Go on up. Fourth floor" They used the elevator. The hallway had been painted an industrial, radar-repellent gray. A wide expanse of wall demarcated each door; there were only three apartments on either side and these presumably were quite large. The last door on the right yielded when Sabine depressed the handle. The two of them now stood in another long corridor, high-ceilinged and rightward curving. Wome shut the door behind him, listening to the subdued hum and kick of music. Sabine took his hand as if nervous.

The passage adjoined a sunken living room in which reposed a tiny purple divan barely large enough to accommodate two people. Glossy art and design magazines had been fanned across the floor. Sabine pointed to a slender-runged ladder. "They must be outside." Sabine first, they hauled themselves up and surfaced onto an immense rough-planked deck. Without transition, bass-heavy music from two tower speakers washed over them. Not more than fifteen people drank and ate from paper plates, idling in a space with capacity for perhaps eighty.

Sabine pulled Wome toward a man leaning over the grill. "*Hola*, Manuel." To Wome, she hissed, "he hates to be called Manuel. He says it's a donkey herder's name."

Manuel looked to be about thirty five. He was wide-shouldered and pale skinned with lidless eyes and he appeared ready for a day at sea in his deck shoes and starched white shorts. "Hey, *linda*." He chewed a wad of gum as though peeved, snapping his big, white teeth into it with showy force. "Another conquest, eh?" He nodded curtly at Wome and looked him over but did not meet his eye.

"Of course. Where's Ivana?"

Ivana was not much older than Sabine and gaunt rather than svelte. Wome liked her kind, horsey face. She hugged both of them and asked "What d'you want to drink?"

Sabine said, "She speaks fluent Russian. Her family moved to Minnesota from St. Petersburg when she was a child. A lot of mystery about how they did it. Apparently they weren't the usual penniless migrants."

Ivana brought them cups of Manuel's punch. To Wome she said, "So tell me about you." Her gray eyes were direct.

"What do you want to know?" Sabine was sidling away, mock-stealthy.

"Where did you two meet?" Is it serious?"

Wome told her, "We're still at the hand job stage, actually."

"The hand job stage? How does Sabine get off?" Ivana's front teeth dangled below her top lip in puzzlement.

Wome gulped his punch, which did not taste at all of alcohol. "We don't really have a relationship of equals." He did not know where his joke would lead.

Ivana thumped his shoulder. "*Merde. Tu blague, toi.* Seriously, though. Sabine needs someone who can handle her. Men just don't seem able to." She began to say more then ducked away. "Excuse me."

Sabine reappeared. "Sorry, I didn't mean for you to be subjected to the third degree. Ivana thinks I need an older man. She's lived with Manolo since she graduated college." She



switched to French and said, "I can't stand him actually. He's a rich snob. And a racist. I joke that she likes him for his money but she's got plenty of her own. Daddy did well."

Mario's punch was velvety and Wome became very drunk. He danced with Sabine on the unpeopled deck and they drank it like water. Sabine left him to talk to someone she knew and Wome danced with Ivana. The music was catchy if not more familiar than at Silo.

Sabine though had vanished and Wome went downstairs to find a bathroom. He was climbing down the ladder with the punch an insistent weight on his bladder when the *vindaloo* raised a disquieting burble across his gut.

Sabine waylaid him in the long, arcing corridor before he found the bathroom and gave him no opportunity to speak. She flattened his body against the wall with hers, kissing him all the while. Wome responded in kind, ignoring the rumbles rising from his abdomen. But by now Sabine had begun to maneuver him so that he felt now a doorframe against his shoulderblades. She had contrived a careful ambush and shunted him sideways without lifting her mouth from his. Their combined weight forced the door open and he almost tripped on a rug as she steered him blindly rearward, tugging his shirt free of his trousers. Wome tipped backwards as his calves met a futon. In the small, warm room, Wome had the sensation of not being properly removed from the party upstairs. He reclined on the low mattress. Sabine removed her shirt and in a quavering voice ordered, "Take off your pants." His first view of Sabine naked confirmed how planed and small hippered her body was. She straddled him and drew his legs from his trousers. Wome was aroused; the urge to urinate faded to a dull perineal ache. The sheer glibness with which Sabine lowered herself until she rested on his thighs effaced all thought of condoms.

Neither moved at first and even time fell away. Sabine was looking down at him with an odd expression. Ferocity was part of it but there was more besides. Wome tried to sit up, to touch Sabine's face and arms. Her haunches moved warmly against his and Sabine forced

him flat, pinning his wrists either side of his head and leaning on them. He lay quite still as she flexed over him and filled his nostrils with the scent of milky skin and fruit punch. Oozy tension gathered at the root of his groin but Wome did not allow himself to make any cry.

At last she flopped away and lay beside Wome, eyes staring past him at a spot on the wall. He touched her cooling breast and she carried his fingers up to her mouth and kissed them. Wome slept but was roused by a sharp roiling in his bowel. He sat up and snatched at his pants, kicking away Sabine's shoe in haste. The music from the deck had become faint. Wome achieved a reasonable calm as he looked down to ask, "Where's the bathroom?"

"Off the living room. Put your pants on first." Sabine did not raise her head from the pillow.

The bathroom was evidently only used by guests. There was no soap near the sink but he flicked aside the mildewing shower curtain and found a plastic bottle with a quarter inch of blue shampoo in the base. Before he washed his hands, Wome studied the head of his penis for sign of disease. A drying crust covered his testicles but in the mirror, he looked no different than when he'd tied his tie at home in the morning. He peered into his eyes but saw no new worldliness in their depths and then he laughed at the reflection of this egg-headed man with splotched loins and a narrow swimmer's body.

Sabine lay motionless beneath a blanket. Wome stood next to the door and softly said, "We should go in case someone comes in." There was no answer and he pulled back the cover, Sabine was on her belly and sleeping easily. Her left thumb was between her lips. Wome could not help but smile as he sidled into bed alongside her.

"Why don't we go for an AIDS test."

Wome hunched lower in his cubicle. "It's a bit late for that, no?"

"Don't you want to be able to make love like that always?" Sabine came near to cooing. "I hate condoms."

"What if you decide to be with someone else?" Wome pressed the receiver against his ear and hoped Betsy was not listening and grinning on the other side of the particle board barrier.

"Ah, *toi aussi*. What if *you* did?"

"I'm not the one who has conquests."

"Don't believe everything you hear." Sabine's laughter was vulgar; she at least seemed unafraid of being overheard. But then her voice dropped to the same conspiratorial level as Wome's. "*Serieuement*, I'm still very tender down there. Are you coming over later?"

Wome could think of no reason not to. Other than fear. He saw his life beginning to spin out of control. He said, "Sabine, let me call you back in a few minutes." Better to avoid her for a few days and sort out his feelings. He still thought about Tara, persistent after-images of her legs and swelling lips.

He heard Betsy say "Your phone rings an awful lot nowadays, Wome."

In the past month, his colleagues had effected a switch and Betsy now taunted him or made sly digs about his fondness for Indian food. Wome stood and looked down at her. With Betsy, coyness was the best defense. "Why do you think that is?"

"No idea. But you've probably got some raging social life we know nothing about." Betsy was smiling but she did not look at him. So it's begun to show, he thought. He still arrived at the office at 8:45, but his output and his capacity for the minutiae of account management had tapered. And daydreams had nothing to do with his new lack of focus. No, it was late nights and being social and he'd begun to stay later at the office just to finish assignments on time. He fended off mid-afternoon sleep with walks to the toilet although he could not snuff his yawns.

Changes in fact were beginning to come thick and fast. On Sunday, he'd overslept and, forced to run, arrived sweating at the church doors precisely as they were being pulled to. His own Pew 14 had been occupied by a family he'd never seen before but happily, a small berth remained on the end of Pew 16. A hatless spinster had been unwilling to shuffle over but Wome squeezed in and pretended not to notice her glaring at him.

Wome was grateful enough that he did not resent being displaced. And it did not take long to observe the family on his habitual bench had been marked for perfection. This was the only way to describe it. The woman—Wome discarded the word matriarch—possessed a solidity ideal for childbearing. From the back of her head, Wome thought she was handsome rather than beautiful, darker-skinned than her spouse and nearly as tall as he. Her left arm drew her daughter into a sheltering embrace even as her own broad hip lay in the grip of her husband against whom she leaned shoulder to shoulder. On the other side of this patriarch sat their son, six years of age, perhaps, to the girl's four and with his father's hand resting like a benison on the crown of his head.

The benches raised a chorus of creaks and sighs to Fitzroy's voice. Wome had high hopes for a homily on the evils of lust and rutting, the virtues of family and matrimony. But the pastor was intent on preaching about fellowship and unity among the faithful and Wome's head turned to thoughts of Sabine and Tara, with occasional cameos by Magda. Fitzroy raged louder and longer than usual and his eye seemed drawn time and again to a place in the congregation across the aisle from where Wome sat and slightly in front. The pews were full and the view impeded by hats and Wome was left to wonder if there was a particularly attractive woman in that spot.

Afterward, Fitzroy stood outside on the tiny church lawn talking to two men, and Wome got a good look at him. A dirty white light shone out of cloud-choked skies and in open air the pastor's face appeared washed out and the skin of his cheeks was rough shaven

and pocked. Wome hunted for the avuncular man that had called him brother before but did not see him. As usual he felt too self-consciously foreign to mill outside the church in the hope of being approached so did not stop.

At home, he lay angled on his bed so he would not sleep too long. An absurd gratitude came over him at having no obligation or demand to attend to. He woke and it was too late to place a call to Douala but Wome picked up the phone anyway. The first thing he said to Kah was, "What do you think Maman would do if you were going to marry a Frenchman?"

"I honestly don't know. But, Wome, you know I don't care. Franz and Marguerite would have to deal with it. My life is in France now."

"I don't think Pere would find a problem with it. It's Maman who has strong ideas." He was toying with the idea of telling Kah about Sabine.

"Has she ever told you who she wants you to marry?"

"No. But do you remember all the things she used to say about Belgians, and English people?"

Kah laughed without mirth. "No. You have to live for yourself, Wome. One day you'll have kids and a wife that wants to go on holiday twice a year. Then you'll have no choice but to worry about others. I hope you're not thinking about marriage yet."

Wome was startled at the ominous way she spoke but after he put down the phone and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water, he decided Kah would not ask him straight out if he was involved with anyone. He wasn't thinking of marriage. How could he? However much he wanted to lie with Sabine every night, at unexpected moments—as he walked out of the office or as he was brushing his teeth he recalled the feeling of going arm in arm with Tara. Or he caught himself imagining how her tall form might feel beneath his body.

A dreariness had begun to worry at Shokare, choking his sleep, which was related to separation from Tara. He found it quite natural as he went to and from work to despise strangers for arbitrary or little cause. Pedestrians who dawdled or riders who leaned their weight against him on the train. Shokare especially hated corporate drones in their striped button downs and cheap dress shoes, dead-eyed men just beginning to run to fat who seemed to commute from apartment to the subway to a climate-controlled office without once leaving a cocoon spun from incuriosity, affluence and scrolling tickers.

In the office he himself suffered apathy and he'd kick sullenly through the dust and furor of the Village in the evenings, irrationally fearful of bumping into Tara in Brooklyn.

He did not need the money but in his fits of idleness he came very close to telephoning Tope and offering his services. Whatever scams they worked, he too could do it. Segun was brainless, and Tope, savvy as he was, lacked polish. But *odu* was not the sort of thing into which one dipped a toe.

What I should be doing is writing, he thought. But the atmosphere in his apartment was motionless and dank, and he sat in front of the fan, disinclined to switch on his laptop and too boneless in the heat even to pick up a book. He'd even stopped noticing whether the ghostly shuffling of furniture and utensils continued.

A week later, signing himself into the student residence, Shokare felt like a lecher or a voyeur of young girls. The accommodation NYU provided for its students eclipsed what he'd known at Fordham. Magda's 23<sup>rd</sup> floor suite was large, even sprawling and insulated from much of the tumult rising off Third Avenue. She welcomed him into the room as if he were the first ever entrant.

"What can I offer you?" She went toward her miniature fridge. Some of the furniture in the room must be hers. The low slung, stained-wood bed could never be standard dormitory issue. But Shokare's attention was drawn by Magda's simple bearing. How many women might fret that a consistent style would come to seem stale? Her skin showed no make up nor any sheen of sweat. He was conscious of the way his shirt felt glued to his upper arms and chest a few moments after he'd stepped off the cross-town city bus.

Shokare accepted a glass of lukewarm water and said, "Were you studying?" From a future lawyer he'd switched to a future surgeon. Which was worse?

"Yes. I took a siesta an hour ago. This heat, I can barely stay awake, Shokare."

"Why not break until it gets dark. It'll be cooler then." A fan—the same model as his own at home—directed a blurry relief toward him every so often. "Let's walk. We could go to Tompkins Square Park." Magda let a few moments pass, flattening her long eyelids as if to sleep then she unfolded her legs and rose to enter the bathroom. Shokare heard a terse splash of water and then slid her feet into the familiar leather slippers and stood ready at the door.

Shokare followed Magda from the lobby into the graying heat of dusk and felt an immediate prickle of sweat break from the skin of his forehead. "Is Luanda hot like this?" He hated the oblique attitude he adopted with this woman who was in some sense still a girl. Magda patently misunderstand his humor and so he did not know how to proceed.

"I'm not from Luanda."

"But you've spent time there?"

"I've spent time in many places." Magda scarcely lifted her feet as she went, perhaps because of the sandals. Somehow the gait was more fluent than a shuffle.

"I hope Angola can avoid going the way of Nigeria." He'd almost said 'my country' but at the last instant thought this phrase would sound affected.

Magda seemed to understand what he meant "Angola is only small. We are 10 million people. But we could lose everything in a few months."

"How?"

"Angolans are proud. We look up to no one. Maybe Brazil only. Our pride is too much." She pronounced it 'match.'

"What about the Lusophone melancholy? Do Angolans have it too?"

"Of course. Angolan music is about loss." She laughed as if to herself. "We love to suffer. But to celebrate also. It's part of our pride."

"Did you enjoy Paris?"

Magda smiled as if she welcomed the question but she was not looking at him. Shokare tried to discover what she'd seen. "*I leave* Paris. Doesn't everybody?" Her hand rose to touch the back of his arm, above the elbow. The contact made him start but Magda was simply pointing, the gesture a delicate extension of wrist and hand. A transvestite was entering Tompkins Square with long, springing strides. He wore very high platform heels and a closefitting armless cream bodysuit and the bells plaited in his hair tinkled with each juddering step.

"Have you been to this park before?" Shokare wanted to feel Magda's touch again, the dry electricity of her fingers.

"Once or twice." With no real curiosity, Magda observed the Square's ritualised fashion parade. Amid the mugging drag queens and Goths who grinned frequently to display honed teeth there were a few almost-unnoticed junkies falling asleep on their feet. Shokare wished he could penetrate her thoughts.

"So what did you like about Paris?"

Magda's flapped her hand in front of her face. "Can we sit down? I'd really like something to cool me." Shokare bought a cornetto wrapped in chocolate-coloured foil paper



and a bottle of water for himself. A slow-accumulating damp made itself felt beneath his armpits as he handed the vendor the money.

A tough-looking woman had come to sit on the ledge next to Magda and engaged her in conversation. Her hair had been shaved down to a stubble of half an inch and dyed a gelid green. Shokare hated these swaggering, bandy legged dykes who seemed always to be spoiling for a fight. On a leash she held a Pekinese that panted as though it were being choked and Shokare thrust the ice cream into Magda's hand before she could take the dog onto her lap. Magda gave him a tiny smile before turning to resume listening to what the woman was saying. Shokare guessed she had no idea what was underway and would laugh if he tried to explain that this skinhead was trying to seduce her. He drank from his water bottle, listening to the woman seethe on in a Queens-accented stammer. Magda nodded and licked complacently at her ice cream until Shokare wanted to throttle her and the bulldagger. But he sat very still and wondered if he were mad. There was little to gain from comparisons between Tara and Magda.

New York seemed swept up in a late-summer fever of caresses and Wome had begun to notice couples everywhere he looked. An unbreaking heat lay over the entire Northeast and the city's inhabitants seemed to have lost the ability for talk and laughter. On his way home from work it was not uncommon to pass a man and woman at an outdoor café, unspeaking and wan from heat exhaustion but nevertheless ardent enough to nuzzle one another's necks.

Sabine insisted on taking Wome shopping f. "Your clothes are so formal, Cherie," she told him. "You need some t-shirts. And shorts too." But his calves were too thin for shorts. Kah was the one who had powerful, shapely legs. And Wome hated these shorts that were not shorts at all but fell as far as midshin.

Without discussion, he and Sabine had passed a threshold and were now a couple although Wome did not yet feed her morsels from his plate. But, judging from the appraisals of strangers, they were not just another couple. A few blocks South of Sabine's apartment, a graying, elegant woman put a hand on Sabine's arm to halt them. "You two make a beautiful couple."

"What does that mean?" Sabine asked after they thanked her and walked on. Beneath her puzzlement Wome perceived a quiet pleasure. "Are we also beautiful as individuals?"

Out browsing, they elicited from many black women a steady scrutiny and in the too-bland eyes of black men, Wome saw nothing decipherable. Unconsciously, he caught himself one evening following the progress down Princeton Street of a couple, of which the man was white and the woman black. After several moments Wome became aware Sabine was also observing the mixed couple and they laughed at the same time, abashed and with nothing to say.

So he carelessly took Sabine's hand as they went and exchanged with her frequent, mouéd kisses by which new relationships are affirmed. He could never be so free with his affections in Douala, nor perhaps even in Fort Greene. But in Manhattan's roiling anonymity it seemed inconsequential and even pleasant to go about with his arms around Sabine.

One humid evening, he pulled them about so they were facing a Fifth Avenue shop window. Sabine said, "That suit is similar to one you've got already." She laughed her growling laugh, which tightened her hold about his hip. "Always suits." But Wome was not paying any attention to the clothes, which in fact he'd not noticed. He was looking instead at their likenesses. The two of them stood far enough back that the occluded glass imperfectly reflected their features but he saw two finely-boned people with arms locked about one another. The angularity of Sabine's cheekbones could be made out, and similarly, the outline

of his long, thin head, but it was difficult at this range and in the light to perceive skin color, or that in fact, their skin was not the same color.

The days flickered past but because of the season the evenings were drawn-out and time seeped rather than elapsed with any purpose. By midmorning most days, clouds effaced all blue from the sky, but these shed little rain and the temperature outdoors varied little whether the time was noon or midnight. Manhattan lay beneath a gluey haze like a Harmattan.

Tarmac stained the soles of Wome's shoes and he took quick, hopping steps whenever he crossed the street. He considered buying an air conditioner but Sabine preferred to settle herself naked in front of the rickety fan, which only managed to buffet warm air this way and that as it ticked through its oscillations.

The next time Wome met Shokare it was in Central Park on a midweek evening. Sabine refused to join him with the excuse that she disliked exercise but Wome knew it was because she did not care for Shokare.

Magda was there and greeted Wome more coolly than she had at Noir. Shokare was wet-faced from exertion and smirking. Inline skates hung by a strap from his shoulder. With his swagger and olive green singlet he seemed like a war-girt soldier but Wome noticed how courteously he spoke to Magda.

"Things seem to be going well," Wome said, feeling some comment was called for. Magda was waiting in line for the bathroom. She was visible from where they stood but out of earshot. She'd turned her back on them but from the tautness of her posture, expected Shokare and Wome to discuss her and would likely be disappointed if they did not.

"Yes. Magda's not so tough as she seems." He was not smiling now and Wome wondered if his smugness was a response to Magda's presence. "But I'm taking things slow." Shokare's face dared Wome to be indiscreet but he said nothing, and Shokare

changed the subject. "I'm so tired. I've been spending too much time with Segun and Tope at a spot called Pangaea. They've got a clique of models they hang out with all the time." He glanced toward Magda as though she might possess superhuman hearing. "Vapid, clueless girls from Calgary or Omaha. Segun's gone mad coking them out of their heads and plying them with champagne. Poor guy, he no go chop any action, though."

Wome said, "Magda doesn't go out much?"

"No. she's hoping to graduate Premed in three years. She wants to be a neurosurgeon, don't ask me why, so she's terrified of drugs." Shokare kissed his teeth with admiration. "Just an African girl who wants to make good. I get the feeling her family's got UNITA ties."

"She's pro-Savimbi?"

"I think so, but she's evasive about it." Shokare caught Magda's eye and waved. He managed to make it seem a chance.

Wome licked saltiness from his top lip. "And Tara?"

"I don't know." Shokare shook his head. "Valerie called me a couple times though."

"Valerie?" Magda was ignoring the two of them once more.

"Yeah, the snobbish wench from Jack & Jill. I think she'd have been all over you if you showed any interest. The Brown thing really impressed her."

Mention of Valerie prodded Wome. "Oh, Melanie Montrose called me yesterday." He explained to Shokare she'd invited them both for dinner.

"We? Thought she wanted to get in *your* pants. Does she want a twofer."

Wome laughed, "She wants us to meet her son. She thinks we could be a good influence."

"Not if I bring Tope and some coke, she won't. Why not though? Should be better conversation than with all these 17 year olds I'm spending time. I'm having a barbecue

Labor Day weekend.” Magda came toward them, wringing water from her hands. She seemed to be looking at Wome. Her clothing made no concessions to exercise; she was shod in flat leather slippers. Shokare put his arm about her shoulder and said, “Oh, and bring your friends. Lanre and that lot. I want Tope and Segun to meet some conscientious, altruistic *Naijas*.”

“So are you coming for Christmas?” Today, Saturday, Maman did not sound in the least sleepy.

“Yes. I’ve spoken to my boss.” Wome took steps toward his bedroom but the telephone cord brought him up short.

“I’m sure he understands you must visit your parents. Four years. Tell them it’s been over four years.”

He considered for one moment telling his mother that his supervisor was a woman. “Any news from Kah?”

Maman ignored his attempt to distract her. “Have you been getting my letters? I’ve not received anything from you in some time, Wome.”

“I got a letter recently. Last week. The one that said Uncle Achille was planning a trip home but you don’t believe him anymore.”

“I’ve sent another one since. I wrote that I’ve begun to worry your concentration would be disturbed in New York and I see I may already be right. A few months, and your letters are already few and far between. I’m thinking of starting to look for a woman for you.” Wome tried to speak but no words came. He sat down. “You’re not too young, you know,” His mother used the cajoling tone he remembered from boyhood. But now she laughed and for a moment, it seemed she was simply teasing him. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to find some village girl. It’ll be someone from Douala. Anyway, read my letter. And I

hope you haven't stopped writing because you telephone us now. Wome, are you still, there? Wome?"

"I'm here, Maman." But he sat very still, his mouth turned from the phone so his breathing was inaudible.

Maman was not done chiding. "Always the same thing. 'I'm fine, Maman. I went to church, Maman. Work is fine, Maman.' I'm sure you're doing other things you don't tell me about. Meeting women. Going to parties. You're becoming closemouthed like your sister."

The lights were off as Wome let himself into Sabine's apartment. He had come from Melanie Montrose's dinner party. He worked his shoes from his feet and leaned his back against the door to listen but there was only street noise rising from Amsterdam Avenue. He entered the bathroom and skimmed Sabine's battered toothbrush over his teeth then slunk into bed. Sabine lay flat and imperturbable on her belly, her eyelids did not so much as flicker. Even asleep Sabine did not seem vulnerable, perhaps because Wome had never seen her assume the foetal position.

"You stink of wine." The pillow swallowed Sabine's words. Wome froze and held his breath. "*C'était bien?*"

He sighed. "I thought it might be awkward but the conversation was interesting, and David, Melanie's son, seemed nice. Shokare got along well with him."

"*Et toi?*" Sabine bundled against him. Her mouth smelled of nothing at all, even in the morning, another peculiarity.

"And me, what?"

"Who did you have a rapport with? I don't care about Shokare, Wome."

"I didn't say much. I wasn't trying to impress David. We're the same age."

"You're too self-effacing." Sabine accused, but it sounded fainthearted; she was beginning to drowse again after the earlier flare of heat. "Always Shokare, Shokare."

"That's not true. But he's more comfortable with people. You don't like him?"

"I don't dislike him." She was muttering like an old woman. "But you're too much in his shadow."

"How?" If he drank too many glasses of wine Wome became insomniac and would lie, no more than half-asleep, deep into the night.

"Don't play dumb. He tries to push people's buttons, to expose them. I've seen you do the same thing."

"Me?" Wome couldn't help belching wine fumes over both of them. He rolled onto his belly and his arm encircled Sabine.

She pulled away. "Don't play with me." Her irritation was unfeigned. Roused from sleep, Sabine quarrelled or loved. Sometimes both.

"What is it? Why are you so angry?" Wome's fingers nudged at her flank.

"I don't know." Sabine was petulant, but there was a laughing undertone in her voice.

"I asked you to come with me." Wome hoped he didn't seem accusatory. He felt sufficiently energetic, barely, to make love but not for a fight.

Sabine allowed her neck to be kissed, mumbling, "Hein. You drank a lot, eh?" and Wome laughed, giddiness coming over him again.

Afterward, he felt the need to assuage her. "I take Shokare for who he is." He lay on his back now, tracing the graininess of the ceiling from the orange glare through the curtain. Sabine had edged away; she became hot, she said, with too much cuddling. In afterthought, Wome continued, "I'm not going to become like him." But Sabine only sigh grunted. "How

come you always fall asleep before me ?” he demanded in some asperity. Her dangerous moods, which both thrilled and frightened him, kept him awake a while longer.

## September

Wome and Sabine idled away the Saturday before Labor Day in Central Park’s Sheep’s Meadow. By noontime the sky turned a blinding loamy white and the air became stifling. On the great field no one but the vendors seemed to move. These ragged men crisscrossed the lawn bent double beneath the heft of their duffel bags. The repetitive cry: Ice cold water, ice cold water had begun to resemble a bird call.

Sabine’s friend, Isabel came to laze with the two of them and they rolled over to make a space for her on the narrow sheet. Wome lay shoulder to shoulder with Sabine, reading Cameron Duodu’s *The Gab Boys*, which he’d found in a second-hand book store. Isabel immediately began to complain about the couple whose child she cared for. Apparently, they were oblivious to their daughter Tabitha’s tantrums. “And they go out practically every single night. Whenever some new restaurant is opening, Ted says to Hannah.....” Isabel’s voice became more and more shrill. Wome found it hard to sympathise.

He touched Sabine’s hand to point out a child taking doddering steps and caught Isabel staring. When, in an affectionate moment, Sabine nuzzled Wome’s neck, he felt the censure of Isabel’s glare on his face. Sabine did not notice but for Wome there was no doubt Isabel wanted to shame him.

Later, as Sabine and Wome went west on 72<sup>nd</sup> street, carrying between them a basket with the blanket and their books, she said, “Isabel thinks we’re moving too fast. She doesn’t trust you.” There was a puzzling coldness in her tone.



He responded in a teasing tone. "I hope you told her I've been swept along by you, that you're the one who sets the agenda." He was wondering when they had discussed him. Sabine's smile was labored. Wome kept his voice light, "I'm joking." But she still did not respond. He let some time pass as he tried to choose his words and at last resolved to keep silent. Perhaps they were spending too much time together.

The heavy weather that had held for a week at last broke. Dusk fell prematurely as rain flushed the streets of torpor and heat sickness. Wome leaned against the edge of the window in Sabine's apartment, watching for blinks of lightning. He tried, whenever one came, to gauge how far away it was. On the bed, Sabine sat up with a newspaper in her lap. He felt reluctant to speak to her and thus could not ask to borrow an umbrella. Nor was he prepared to run as far as the subway over slick flagstones. The tension had been made by Sabine and his going would lift from her the obligation to defuse it. The force of the rain was adequate pretext to wait things out in her tight little apartment, perhaps force her hand.

During the night rain tattooed without stopping and Wome waited for Sabine's fingers to caress his hip or the nape of his neck but the touch never came. She did not even permit him to initiate contact and bring out intimacy, which might erase misunderstanding. At one point, Wome rolled to relieve a tingling in his leg and his elbow nudged her shoulder blade. Sabine flinched and crabbed away from him to the far edge of the bed.

In the morning, he sat up muzzy-headed and dry eyed from dreams of tumbling cities and eruptions of light. Sabine wore a look of surprise as if she expected him to be gone. She turned away before he could wipe crustiness from her eye, and rose from the bed.

It was midmorning before he announced, "I'm going home." The sky was a watery blue.

"I thought we were going to Shokare's." Sabine did not bother to look at him. She went to her closet and pulled garments free of hangers. So Wome waited and after half an

hour she left the bathroom wearing a form-fitting dress Wome had not seen her wear. There was too much rouge on her cheeks.

On the subway, they kept a rigid distance between them. Steadily, Wome felt his patience being rubbed away to nothing by this sulking but he reasoned Sabine should be the one to apologize. In Fort Greene, Sabine sat on the couch as if she were in a doctor's anteroom and showed no interest in entering Wome's bedroom.

Wome showered and was putting on fresh clothes when he heard Derek surface and begin preparations for breakfast. Sabine's voice came to him through the door. "Why don't you come with us, we're going to a barbecue," The same thought had occurred to Wome—he was unwilling to face Sabine's moodiness alone any longer—but it was presumptuous of her to ask Derek.

Derek was too grateful to suspect anything was the matter or to notice that Wome and Sabine chose to walk either side of him. He gabbed to Sabine about the newspaper business as the three of them trekked through Clinton Washington.

Shokare's building was situated in a Brooklyn no man's land that edged Clinton Hill but lay on the far side of Atlantic Avenue, a low cement block of apartments set among shopfront garages. The front door hung open. A stray dog sniffed through the bars of the gate, no doubt scenting meat. It ignored Derek's shooing hand. Half full cups lay about the threshold and front steps, seeping their dregs onto the stone. From within, came the voice of Fela howling about his mother. "Sounds like a partyyyyyy." Derek clapped his hands. Sabine looked down her nose at him but Wome refused to meet her eyes. He felt in no mood to share Sabine's scorn.

Two sylphs of about eighteen stood in the kitchen with cans of beer at their lips. Their feet on the mud-smeared floor were bare. Hamburger buns in plastic and bottles of soft drinks heaped the counters. Derek shifted his stance—the women were taller than he

was—and was ignored for his trouble. Sabine busied herself with searching out wine. Wome looked out from the kitchen window. In the garden, women outnumbered men. Magda was there, and Tope in a pair of shorts, shooting lascivious glances in every direction. Even Lanre had come, he too appeared incapable of letting his eyes rest for long on a single spot. Shoeless girls cavorted to Afrobeat; they ringed Segun who danced in the middle of the garden with goatish glee.

Shokare was nowhere in sight. Wome went downstairs. As he passed the grill, a girl squealed at him in salutation; she was holding a pair of tongs that dripped blood and grease on her bare foot. Lanre grabbed him and Wome scented a curdled beer smell wafting from him. Mohammed proffered one and Wome took it. “These boys are serious *odu*.” Lanre gestured at the cluster of girls, neither awed nor repelled.

Mohammed was unable to stand still. “Introduce me to that sauce over there.” He picked out the most emaciated woman present; she was in conversation with Magda. Surely a hanger on rather than a model, thought Wome.

“How do you know they’re *odu*?” Wome felt disappointed Lanre had guessed so accurately.

As if in response, Tope fizzed an entire bottle of champagne over the dancers, which prompted shrieks. He repeated the action with another bottle. Behind him were three stacked crates. Even behind his impenetrable sunglasses, Tope’s self-satisfaction was evident. Some of the girls were quaffing champagne *odu* style but their thin wrists were scarcely able to support the heavy, oar-like bottles.

Magda was sipping from a plastic flute and she greeted Wome with wide coquettish eyes. The makeup on her eyelids and forehead had begun to clot in the excitement and Wome experienced his first stirring of distaste for her. “He’s inside somewhere,” Magda told him when he asked after Shokare, then she jumped aside to avoid another champagne

downpour. Her smile seemed a little strained. Wome observed everyone drank, but no one seemed to be eating.

Lanre, red-eyed Mohammed and Aggrey leered harder than Segun ever had. Wome tired of the spectacle and went indoors to look for Shokare. He crossed Sabine on the stairs; unsmiling, she raised her eyebrows at him and he ignored her.

Wome stood on the threshold of the first room he came to, a spare bedroom with a single bed. The deep blue color of the room appeared rich, newly painted but entering, he saw this was simply an effect of the angle at which sunlight penetrated the glass. Of the four unevenly spaced prints on the walls, Wome was drawn to one named Two Beggars. It was a composition of distantly humanoid upright ochre forms ranged against a verdigris backdrop. The prints all carried the signature of Bruce Onobrakpeya, a name that nagged at Wome's memory.

The second door yielded grudgingly. Wome barged it ajar with his shoulder, using more force than necessary. "Easy, easy." Shokare seemed to know it was Wome. At least he showed no surprise as he nudged aside the squat bedside table that was barring the door. His thumb and forefinger held a rolled marijuana cigarette like a dart. An Asian woman sitting on the bed, looked up, incurious and with reddened, pinprick eyes. This room was more spacious than the spare room and equally Spartan. Beside the window had been tacked the jacket for a book. Above the title, *Sex and Racism*, Wome saw an illustration of a Caucasian Muhammad Ali in his classic pugilist's pose. Beside him, a chocolate-skinned Marilyn Monroe suppressed the billow of her skirts.

"June, this is Wome," Shokare said. June waved a hacked off plastic straw in greeting, although it might have been invitation. Her torso hunched over some object Wome could not see. "You don't want any coke, do you?" Shokare shut the door and barricaded it again.

Why not? Wome thought. Disgust with Sabine's sulks was still on him. Plus, June was good looking. "Better you share that with someone. You've done a shitload already," Shokare said as though June needed coaxing. Wome sat beside her and she passed him a hardback book with powder arranged in careful spirals on it. Wome took a rough snort, then a second. There was no feathering of the nostrils this time; it was all burn, like a plume of water spurted up his nose.

"Hey. Who's your coke head buddy?" June's voice was brittle. Wome extended his arm toward Shokare, careful to hold the book level.

Shokare waved it off. "Not so keen on Charlie. Besides half the people out here are hopped up as hell. Someone needs to stay sober."

"Why d' you call it Charlie, Shok?" Wome felt lust flit across his body whenever June spoke. He wished Shokare would leave.

Instead Shokare settled against the open window, as if to test its capacity to bear his weight. "That's what they call it in England. But it's not my thing, coke." He waited to be prodded but June seemed to be ambling through some cocaine thicket. She eyed the last two spirals as though considering whether to hoard them. "Smack. That's what I'm curious about." Shokare exhaled smoke. "But I'm not ready yet."

"I've done smack." June wiped her nose like a child.

Wome asked, "How was it?" His hand landed on June's bare lower back but he took care Shokare could not see what he was doing.

"Intense." Just when it seemed June wouldn't elaborate, she replaced the book on the bed with regret. "But maybe that's because I'd done coke and E also."

"*Kai*," Shokare said. "June is hard core, Wome. You can go off the rails hanging with her."

June trained mad eyes on the coke once more. Some stray grains were sunk among nubs on the book's surface and she worried at them; her delicate strokes with the straw were somehow frantic.

Wome said, "Shokare, why don't you go and get Lanre or one of the others. Maybe someone else wants some of this."

Shokare appraised him a few moments. "You're becoming quite a cunt, Wome. They'll blame me for that, I'm sure." Wome didn't know who 'they' was nor did he much care in this instant. His fingers dove into the waistband of June's skirt but there was no give.

"You can't give away my coke." June's hangover eyes took Wome in. She looked ready to hide the book behind her.

"It's not your coke, June." Shokare did not look at her and his voice was toneless. He at last let up his scrutiny of Wome and, pushing aside the table, went out. Wome barricaded the door once more and when he sat down, his hand returned to its place on June's back. Sidelong, he watched her then he seized the skirt's zipper and levered it down. Coke courage, Shokare's friend Alex had called it. June's buttocks were cool and smooth as glass and she wore underwear more insubstantial than anything of Sabine's. Wome wanted with one sharp pull to rip it away.

"Did you do E?" Rapt, he hadn't seen June duck her head to look at him. He extricated his delving hand then did not know where to rest it.

"Eh, no. Why?"

"You're very touchy feely." She made it an observation. "It's nice." Did she want him to continue? A vision of them coolly fucking stole into Wome's head. "Do you want some. E, I mean" June rummaged in a tiny handbag Wome hadn't noticed before. He watched, aching to kiss her. His thoughts and words seemed formed of sharp edges and events unfolded with a strenuous hyperclarity, an intensity he could not endure. "Sex isn't so

great on coke.” June gave up searching and looked Wome in the eye as if to make a point. “I think I finished them. What should we do?” It was no clear invitation but Wome pressed his lips on June’s and she responded with complicity if not zeal. The inside of her mouth felt scoured, raw; on her tongue was the tinny taste of blood. Wome wanted to contuse her lips with his teeth. His left hand passed between her knees—He and June sat almost crosswise to one another on the bed—and he prodded her thighs apart. His longest finger tripped over thin cotton but he found only dryness.

The door knob rattled and through the wood came Shokare’s voice. “I left him in here, Sabine.” Wome sprang apart from June. He wiped his hand on the bed’s coverlet, a gesture that brought sharp recollection of his first night with Sabine and the moment she’d smeared ejaculate across his chest. He stood up as the unwieldy table barring the door gave way and there was Shokare in the doorway, smirking and alone.

“*Pute*,” Wome swore and Shokare stood aside to let him stamp past.

At his back June said in a wondering voice, “This is just the best coke.”

Wome wolfed a hamburger bun to rid himself of the medicinal trickle in his throat. The garden now teemed. As he was going outside, the door of the bathroom on the landing swung out without warning and Wome was forced to take a hurried sidestep to avoid being hit. Sabine and then Segun came out and Sabine lurched past as if Wome were not there. Then she stopped and turned as Segun carelessly passed between the two of them. Wome stared for one dull-eyed moment but when Sabine opened her mouth he continued down the stairs.

Outside, some of the women were now in bras; champagne-sticky breasts were improbably pendulous against wasted torsos. Wome’s colleagues from Landen Jansen, who he’d forgotten he invited, had arrived. Even in the mid-afternoon smaze, his pupils were telltale enough for Amanda, who peered at him and said, “Have *you* been coking, Wome?”

He tried to bluster. "Why, do you want some?"

Amanda touched arch fingertips to her breastbone. "I only do coke with people I know well." Her answer seemed both rebuff and invitation but Sabine was descending the stairs, trying to catch Wome's eye and keep her footing at the same time.

She came and touched his arm. In a diffident voice she said, "Cheri, can we talk?" Her face was blowsy with make up. Amanda stared but Betsy had discretion enough to pretend her interest lay elsewhere.

An uneasy blend of chagrin and guilt weighed on Wome as he led Sabine back upstairs into the bathroom. He shut the door. "What's on your mind?"

"I wasn't doing anything with, with Segun. I was, I just did a little coke."

He put his hands in his pockets. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Sabine."

"Wome, don't be like this. I know how it looks. I've been acting strange then you see me coming out of the bathroom with someone. But we weren't doing anything. He didn't even try."

"I believe you."

Sabine reached for his wrist but he was reaching for the door and after a moment's resistance she let him go. Wome went downstairs, surprised at how calm he felt. Amanda was nowhere to be seen and he stood close by a South Asian couple who were telling Betsy about their recent visit to Ibiza. Over Wome's shoulder however a tutorial was taking place and he maneuvered his body to better hear and see. Tope had his arms about Lanre and Mohammed and he was asking in a voice thick with intoxication, "For *whetin* you wan' do MBA?"

"To make money." Lanre's earnestness surprised Wome. "I want to start a financial services firm in *Naija*."



"Nah money you wan make?" Tope could barely get out the words. His hand released Mohammed's shoulder and from his slacks he drew with some effort an immense roll of bills, which he held up before each face. Mohammed goggled but Lanre swallowed and managed to cover his awe. "You see dis? Na thirteen thousand dollars. You know how much I get for house? I can buy two of you." Tope's liverish, saliva-specked lower lip jutted in contempt. "Let me give two of you a lessin." He resumed holding them about the shoulders and they sagged thankfully against him. "*Shogbo Yoruba?*"

"Ah. *Mogbo*," Lanre said then went on in English. "Of course now. But Mohammed doesn't."

Swagu, the short-haired Indian girl recently returned from Spain addressed Wome. "Do you want half an E?"

"Uh...Now?" Wome said.

"You can take it whenever you want." She looked at him with liquid eyes. "Nitin just did a whole one by himself but I only want a half." Nitin was plump and blinked with alarming frequency. Wome took the bluish half-crescent from Swagu's hand with a quick glance at it.

Tope was slurring, ".....don't need MBA to make money. Me, I no get MBA. The money you wan' make, 'e *dey* here for America. The money I don make here, I no fit make am for London, *sef*. I came here from UK." Wome watched from the corner of his eye as all three staggered. "You know mule? Heroin, cocaine..... I started as a mule. Six trips." Tope held up the fingers of his right hand. "I was so scared, *abai* I drank only Ovaltine. When I say I fit buy two of you, no be money only I *dey* talk o. I don live life. I've seen tings *wehey dey* make man cry blood."

"But we can't all be doing *odu*." Mohammed sounded put upon.

Tope kissed his teeth. "What are you talking about odu? I'm a businessman. Business is business." He looked to see if Mohammed understood but Mohammed was staring at the too-thin, horsy woman he'd pointed out earlier to Wome. She was wiltedly drunk, too far gone to stand upright.

Shokare took Wome by the arm. "What did you say to Sabine? She's really upset. You're becoming a real bastard."

"Don't talk to me about bastards. What about Tara?" Wome wished the words back as soon as he said them. A rage took hold of Shokare's features. His eyes pinched nearly closed and his lips vanished between his teeth. Wome braced against Shokare swinging out or shoving him to the ground but the Nigerian willed his face smooth. Only Shokare's eyes held the same staring hatred. Both of them seemed relieved, even glad, to look away. The garden was in the grip of a cheerless intoxication that had nothing to do with their quarrel. The music continued to play too loudly although no one retained strength or sobriety to dance. The models sat in a dispirited huddle, their long arms draped over one another. Too much champagne had been drunk and Tope alone seemed indefatigable.

As if to himself, Wome said, "I'll go and find Sabine." But he didn't see her and, unwilling to reenter the room in which he'd kissed June he went home, saying goodbye to no one. He half wished for Derek's company but he thought his roommate had long since left. In his palm he clutched the half-pill Swagu had given him.

Brooklyn was riotous. Hollering children chased shouting through the dark streets, their faces garish in the amber wash from the streetlights. Clinton Street was underwater; rivulets ran into Fulton Street from a fire hydrant that spewed fitfully now. On the sidewalks stood deck chairs and split metal drums for grilling meat that had been abandoned like debris.

In the disarray of his living room, the phone rang three, four, five time but Wome ignored it and made no move to turn on the television. It was sleep he wanted but fear of suffocating loneliness prevented him from entering his bedroom. One week ago his social life had begun to encroach on his job and then, in the span of one day, needless fallings out with the only people he'd begun to feel close to. So Wome came face to face for the first time with possibility that Shokare was a good friend, now that they had traded insults and nearly blows. The phone stopped ringing and the near-silence seemed to convey the possibility of never seeing or hearing from Sabine or Shokare again.

He woke still upright on the couch. There was a pinching in his neck and the corners of his mouth had gummed shut with beery spit. A tentative early sunlight peeped through carelessly drawn curtains but more immediate was a shrieking buzz invading his ears. The doorbell. Wome suspected a prank and almost tripped as he hurtled down the stairs. But there was Sabine on his front stoop and he opened the door. Even the weepiness of Sabine's eyes could not entirely suppress the weary, astonished laugh that rose in Wome's throat. "*Mais qu'est que tu fais ici, Sabine?*" She wore jeans and a fresh t-shirt and appeared more girlish than Wome had ever seen her.

He followed her up the stairs; Sabine refused to speak until they entered his bedroom. "I couldn't sleep. I was so angry at you." She glanced at his made up bed then looked accusingly at Wome. "You didn't spend the night here."

Wome felt another urge to laugh but he remembered his cruelty of the previous day. He said, "I fell asleep on the couch," and patted a spot beside him on the bed but Sabine remained standing with her arms folded. In a reasonable voice, he said, "Sabine, why are we fighting?"

A fresh wave of crying melted Sabine's face, tears eliding the severity of her cheekbones. "I was seeing someone before I met you. He didn't want to get serious. It

seems silly but...with all the time you and I have been spending together, I started to feel confused. Wome, I slept with him recently, and I realized he doesn't care about me. But then I felt guilty because of you, how things are with us." Sabine scrubbed a hand over her face. "Then when Isabel said we were rushing things, I started to think about it, to worry. I wanted you to tell me I was being silly, that I shouldn't listen to her." She tried to laugh, but it was a spluttering thing. "It isn't like we're moving in together. But when you could only joke about us, I thought, maybe it's just sex for Wome too. I know I should have asked but I thought, he'll only lie anyway, or make another joke and then change the subject." Wome invited her again to sit but Sabine shook her head. "So, now you know why I've been so strange. But Wome, I'm not going to sleep with Eric again. Don't be angry with me."

With a pang of guilt about June, Wome put his arms around Sabine. He did not care that he was unwashed and in need of a shave and pulled Sabine beneath the sheets. A small part of his happiness was the curious satisfaction of being with her in his own bed. Not until much later, sometime in the afternoon, did he remember in a waking moment to wonder if Sabine had used protection with Eric. But he did not ask.

Sabine's fit of pique passed. Wome was beginning to understand her moods. On some days, she carried herself with a solitary, slightly aggrieved air. Or she might begin with restless urgency on a Saturday afternoon to tidy the already immaculate kitchen or rearrange her books. Wome went for walks. And when it seemed she especially wanted to be alone he went to his own apartment.

"I'm sorry, Cherie. I drive you away," Sabine said late one Sunday, hours after he had got on the subway to return to Brooklyn. She was contrite but did not ask him to come back.

Wome had told no one, not even Kah, about Maman's threat to find him a woman, by which he feared she meant wife. He dreamed of meeting his mother in some unfamiliar marketplace. Marguerite pulled a slim, tall girl from behind her back and with a gentle shove thrust her toward Wome. Then without transition he was back in America, now married to this nameless woman with an indistinct face and they were living in the Fort Greene apartment without Derek. This dream, which exhausted him, haunted Wome. The prospect of going home in a few months no longer seemed so exciting.

With small steps, autumn made its presence felt. The days were crisp and clear, as they had been in early summer but in the brilliant red evening an urgent southeasterly wind eddied up leaves and dust across the city. Sabine began to put on a knotted blue sweater whenever she went out.

Wome was making headway with *Swann's Way*, which he was reading because of Shokare's taxicab rant. His nostalgia, quiet for some weeks as he spent time with Shokare and Sabine, flared in answer to Proust's wistful writing. He liked to read Sabine passages although she would often roll her eyes or look at him pityingly. He wanted an opportunity to discuss the novel with Shokare, not to gloat but with the hope of encouraging him to give Proust another try. A dull antagonism lay between himself and the Nigerian, a silence born of shame and self-righteousness and so Wome resolved to wait rather than attempt to reestablish contact.

"Listen to this," Sabine struggled to a sitting position in her bed, untangling her legs from about his beneath the covers. "Such grandiose claims. Some guy at MIT thinks this Internet is going to revolutionize the world." Sabine snorted and read a paragraph from the New York Times article she'd been reading. "What crap." If Wome did not respond, he risked being accused of indifference to the world around him, so he said, "Why don't you believe it?"

"They're always telling us this or that will transform modern life. Do you believe it?"

Wome shrugged, amused at Sabine's tendency to get excited over opinions in newspapers.

One hot mid-September Sunday, Sabine accompanied Wome to a Catholic church on Central Park West. This was a compromise reached after Wome threatened to get up early to return to Brooklyn. Weeks had gone by since he'd attended a service.

Sabine had wondered, "But why do you have to go to Brooklyn? There must be fifteen Catholic churches within a twenty-block radius."

Wome felt reluctant to enter an unfamiliar church alone. Parishioners were territorial and at a service on the Upper West Side, his black skin would be conspicuous. But he said, "I like my neighbourhood church." He was touched when Sabine relented despite being very much lapsed and effectively an atheist. And he felt flattered by the bustle with which she got ready the Sunday morning, but after forty-five minutes this gave way to worry they would miss the early service. At last though, she was ready. Her face had been lightly touched with cosmetics and she wore a small-brimmed hat and a white summer sleeveless dress with a cardigan over it against the wind. On Amsterdam Avenue, she ran her arm through Wome's with such earnestness he bit back a laugh. He felt too grateful.

But the service offered meagre satisfaction. The interior of the church was a dreary, damp cavity. The chanting and swinging of censers seemed more fitting for some pagan faith and Wome wondered how the rites he'd grown up with could have so quickly come to seem decadent and shorn of meaning. He missed the idiosyncrasies of the Clinton Washington Methodist Church, and even the secular rituals of vanity and gossip.

There seemed little need to pay attention today to the sermon, which, anyway, was long and abstruse. The members of this cold, forlorn Upper West Side church, Whites of indeterminate origin, were too sunk in private contemplation. Indeed, one man's lips never

stopped moving in supplication. The few Latinos present sat up with an attentiveness that was a sure sign of their incomprehension.

Wome and Sabine were among those who immediately left after the last hymn had been sung. In separate ways the experience had exhausted both of them and this drew them together. Sabine held fast to Wome's hand as they went hurriedly west through still empty streets, her steps making staccato clicks. "I need a cigarette," she told him but neither of them found much to say. At home they made feverish love and then spent the rest of the day in the bed.

Shokare met Magda as she came through the turnstile at Clinton Washington Station. He kissed her and cinched an arm about her waist—with affection but also so he could hurry her along. There was chicken in the oven he did not want to burn.

"So, Angolinha. How was school today?"

"Busy. Chemistry and Biology both. I have a lot to read."

Aboveground, a man who might have been homeless listed toward them. At the last instant he seemed to lose interest and stumbled on. Hugging Magda tighter so they proceeded as if in a three-legged race, Shokare said, "It's getting a bit chilly for these slippers of yours, no?" Magda wore a sweater, but it was a thin wool.

"How was your day, Cherie?"

"You're not going to respond?" Through the fabric of her jeans, Shokare poked Magda's hip.

She giggled. "What?" I hate cold and so I try to hold on to summer, that's all. Maybe when it gets really winter you'll take me to Miami for a weekend."

"Hmmm." Shokare was noncommittal. "My day was nothing special. You know, I'm thinking of quitting this job, right?" He let go of her to unlock his gate and gave silent thanks the unexplained movements in his apartment had subsided.

"Are you looking for another job?"

"No. There's no job I want, frankly." Now the weather had begun to turn Shokare was grateful for the way his flat absorbed and banked the day's sunshine. He went to the oven to check his chicken and was relieved that it had not burned. After her first overnight visit Shokare forbade her textbooks in his apartment but Magda was already fishing out her notebook.

As he doled salad onto their plates, she came up behind him and pressed her slim body against his back. "Don't leave your job," she said.

He put an album by Bonga on the stereo, and this made Magda laugh. She swallowed her first forkful of salad and said, "I'm so spoiled. A working man who cooks for me."

Shokare winked. "My turn will come, don't worry." Magda let a few moments pass and he said, "I talked to my mother today. I think she's keeping something from me."

"A lover? And yes, your turn is coming." She brushed his toe with her calf.

"You're silly. I don't think a lover. It's not something good though. It could be my father's threatening her with something."

"My mother hates my father." Magda smiled like an imp. "My parents haven't seen each other in ten years. Even now my mother always says, 'What use does Angola have for poets?'"

"Do you like your father's poetry?"

"Oh. He's the most beautiful man, my father. A gentle soul. And he speaks and writes Portuguese better than anyone else in Angola. Maybe even Portugal. He's always



been very good to me—I'm his favourite—but I can't understand why he married my mother. He's a socialist. They're total opposites, on opposite sides of everything."

Shokare set down his fork and gave Magda a look as mischievous as hers. "And I take it your mother's for that wanker Savimbi who was in bed with the Boers and the CIA?"

Without blinking Magda said, "Tell me about your father?"

But Shokare only laughed, planning to return at some point to the matter of Angolan politics. After the dishes had been washed though, and they'd dug themselves beneath his heavy duvet, He tried instead to catch Magda off guard. She was reviewing notes in a tiny t-shirt and the heavy tortoiseshell glasses she never wore in public. "Why don't you move in with me? There's lots of space here. I don't see enough of you as it is."

Behind the bold glasses, her face held the same contemplative expression as it had the night he met her. She kissed him, and as a frightened child might, set her head in his lap. She lay so still Shokare thought she'd fallen asleep, worn out with studying. Trying not to wake her, he retrieved his book but then she wriggled out from beneath his arm and sat up, righting her glasses. She took up her notepad without giving him another look and Shokare knew her well enough to understand she would give the matter much thought before she gave an answer.

"I'm seeing someone," Wome told Kah. He'd rehearsed for a few days how he would tell her and hoped to elicit advice rather than approval or reproof.

Kah was as usual nonplussed. "Tell me about her."

He'd not anticipated open-ended curiosity and said, "She's Canadian." Silence followed in which each waited for the other to speak then Kah moved on to the topic of whether Wome would be in Douala for Christmas. Wome's suspicions began to rise that his sister had a boyfriend whose existence she wanted to keep concealed. He saw no other

reason why she should be so incurious. Maman had spoken the truth: He and Kah were equally closemouthed.

On a morose Sunday on which a chill unceasing rain carried warning of imminent winter, neither of them felt particularly inclined to venture out from Wome's apartment. Wome coaxed Sabine to share the half pill of ecstasy with him. It was too small to be cut in two so Wome ground it to crumbs with a teaspoon. "Do you think we should dissolve it in water?"

Sabine laughed. "Probably not." They dribbled flakes into their upturned mouths, gagging a little at the chalkiness and the bitter quinine taste. They got into bed to wait but after an hour nothing had happened and he grappled Sabine and began mercilessly to tickle her. When Sabine at last recovered her breath, she said: "If this is what's supposed to happen I don't understand the hype at all." Wome had begun to think drugs were a letdown and said nothing.

Wome bumped into Tara on Fulton Street in Fort Greene one tepid, Indian-summer evening. He was on his way home to gather some things and had not thought about her in some time. He'd even forgotten Tara was in some sense the reason for tension between himself and Shokare.

The same week, he met her on a much colder night at a bar in which he'd never been. The place was newly opened and as sleekly fitted out as anything in Manhattan. Tara wore no lipstick but her appearance was unchanged otherwise. She was studying, she told him, to get into law school. Wome related a few anecdotes from Melanie's Montrose's dinner and mentioned Shokare's name once. For a moment there seemed to be nothing to say then, after a slight hesitation, Tara asked, "Are you seeing anyone?"

Wome said he was. "Are you?"

"Kind of. I've been spending time with someone. But I'm trying to focus on the LSATS." The words seemed intended to reassure herself more than him. "Actually, Wome I wanted to introduce you to someone."

"Valerie?" Wome blurted and felt foolish.

Tara pursed her lips. "Er, no. Though she wouldn't mind at all. No. A good friend of mine from California."

Wome confessed, "I've never been out with an African American woman."

"Really?" Tara seemed startled by her own surprise. "Where's your girlfriend from?"

"She's Canadian. Quebecois." He hesitated, but the anticipated question never came.

"Ah. Is speaking the same language really important to you?"

"No. I'm just as comfortable in English." As they sat knee to knee, Wome felt less and less tormented by his attraction for Tara. He thought of Sabine and was content in the knowledge he would go afterward to her. Rather, conversation with Tara underscored the absurdity of his unresolved spat with Shokare. The longer they talked without mentioning his name, the greater grew Wome's embarrassment. He said at last, a propos of nothing, "You know, Shokare isn't a bad guy." It sounded as though he were coming to the Nigerian's defense.

Tara smiled. "No, he's not. I wouldn't have gotten involved if he was. But he's afraid of too much."

"He's a product of his environment," Wome heard himself say. "Primary school in Nigeria then England. It was a case of bully or be bullied." Articulating the idea, he found it plausible although he'd never thought deliberately about it at all.

"Were you bullied?"

He laughed. "No, I was the quiet type and made sure never to annoy anyone. I have a very tough older sister so I learned to hold my tongue."

"But you think Shokare was a bully?"

"Not physically. Shokare's the type who *makes mout* as they say in Nigeria. He knows how to *yab*, put someone in their place. He's an in-between type." Wome wondered how Shokare would react hearing himself so described. "There was one boy I remember in my school, older than me but small for his age. Yet nobody all the way up to form five—big sixteen year olds—would ever touch him. Everything that came out of his mouth made us laugh and he shamed bullies into doing nothing." Wome laughed to remember. "One time, Sule, that was his name, told another boy who was begging to avoid a thrashing, practically on his knees and Sule shouted out, 'Ah ah, nah prostrate cancer whey you get?' Even the teacher laughed." Tara did not understand and he said, "In Nigeria, you're supposed to prostrate to your elders, you know, get down flat." But she smiled and Wome knew she still had not grasped the joke. He asked, "Do you remember that barbecue, not far from here, where I first met Shokare. Right before he left he said, 'Why are you guys sticking so close together like this with all these beautiful women here; people will think you're gay.'"

Tara laughed. "Ah hah. I wondered why we left so suddenly. So he was afraid y'all were going to beat him up," she mused. At the time, I couldn't understand what he was so worked up about."

The phone roused Wome one morning as he slept in his own bed. He feared bad news and hunted for his wristwatch before he took up the phone. The voice on the line was a familiar one but a few beats passed before he recognized it as Shokare's.

"Wome, what's up? Were you sleeping?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost seven. Listen, I'm moving to Manhattan. Magda and I are moving in together."

Wome felt only a prickle of irritation at this news. Even though it was time to get up he said, "can you call me back in a couple of hours." Shokare tried to lodge some protest, but whatever he was saying was lost as Wome put the phone down.

Later, as he sat at his desk drinking coffee and steeling himself for the day's work, it occurred to Wome Shokare had rung to ask for help. The thought gave him relief but also resentment that the first contact after a month's silence should be a demand rather than an overture.

## October

Days passed though without further word and then Shokare left on Wome's voicemail an invitation and the address of his new apartment. Sabine was as curious as Wome, especially because the building was on East Seventh Street, not far from where Ivana lived. Together, they took the train downtown and then walked through the dusk.

Shokare opened the door to them and the veins at his temple bunched as he took Wome's hand but his face remained otherwise even. To Sabine, however, he was quite solicitous. The apartment itself was narrow and long. Wome thought the tall ceilings and self-contained vestibule resembled a church transept. The living room was strewn with one or two boxes and other belongings awaiting unpacking. It was not furniture that Wome and Sabine stepped over but masks and idols. Wall triptychs rested on newspapers in preparation for hanging. Laid face up were tall, soapstone carvings that belonged on pedestals. In the bedroom, with its recessed lighting stood only a broad, low-slung bed crisply made up with pale grey sheets. "Is this your stuff?" Sabine bent to peer at a sundial already mounted on the wall. Perplexity creased her brow.

Shokare lazed now on a couch of a smooth, velvety appearance. He was dressed as Wome had never seen him: silvery button down shirt and sleek black trousers. "It's Magda's. She'll tell you about it when she gets here."

"Why did you move?" Wome kept his voice neutral.

"Well, we wanted to live together but Magda wasn't keen on the commute from Brooklyn. We looked at Brooklyn Heights but it was more expensive there than here." Sabine shot Wome a look and he asked what the rent was. "Twenty seven hundred," Shokare said with a too-straight face.

"Alloooo." Magda's coo echoed down the passageway. In a few moments she slid into the living room and dutifully came first to kiss Shokare. Then she took Sabine in a one-armed, sidelong embrace that made her stiffen. If Shokare's clothing surprised Wome, Magda's attire was equally unexpected. Yet, even jeans and white running shoes failed to render Magda ordinary. She hugged Wome and for one electric instant her thighs pressed dangerously against his.

Shokare had begun to list the virtues of his new neighbourhood. "I like that I can walk to work if I get up early enough."

"You have a lot of art," Sabine said and Magda rolled her eyes with a sniff. Sabine's throat and forehead silted of color; her pallor and habit of drawing in her cheeks made her seem livid.

To avert harsh words, Wome pointed at a soapstone figurine of a man wrapped about with hideous serpentine coils. "Tell me about this one." Magda explained its provenance and Wome said, "Are you glad to be out of the dorm?" Sabine had gone to sit beside Shokare and he stood side by side with Magda, not daring to look her full in the face.

"Ouuai." Magda darted a look at Sabine before switching to English. "It was too stressful living with other students. Always, they come back drunk and woke me up. I love

to come home only to Shokare then go out for a quiet meal.” Magda now struck Wome as wholly approachable and not an Angolan rebel princess as Sabine mocked. When had the two women resolved to despise one another?

“Wome Cheri, we should go. We need to be across town in half an hour.” Wome was amused and pleased to hear Sabine’s lie. He and Magda turned in the same moment and again Wome noticed her flickering, unreadable glance in Sabine’s direction. He checked his watch but it was a needless subterfuge. His presence and Sabine’s had quickly become, plainly, an unwanted intrusion. Shokare had wanted to show off his and Magda’s new flat and this had been achieved. His smiling complacency could not hide his intent, especially as he’d not so much as offered his guests water to drink. He intended Wome and Sabine to witness his improving fortunes but not necessarily partake in them.

With an attempt at amity Magda bussed Sabine then grazed her cheek against Wome’s. He avoided looking directly at her. In Shokare’s tight handshake, Wome sensed his presence represented some quiet peril. At the door, no one mentioned getting together again soon.

Wome paused in the lobby to let Sabine proceed before he spoke. “You don’t approve, do you?”

“It’s not that. I don’t trust the whole thing.”

“It seems real, even if it came out of nowhere. It’s good for Shokare.”

“I wonder. Magda’s very complex.”

In French, he asked, “And Shokare’s straightforward?”

“I told you before. He’s vulnerable.” Her irritation did not seem to be directed at Wome. As though it were still mid-summer, brown-skinned teenagers in shirt sleeves squatted on a nearby stoop. *Cocoyes*. Wome liked the sound of the word as he said it softly to himself.

As he wondered why a name existed in pidgin English for Latinos, a new thought came to him. "Why were you and Magda so tense around each other?" They turned to go northward on First Avenue.

"I don't know but it has something to do with you." Sabine's stare made him edgy.

"Me? Maybe its the way Shokare looks at you."

Sabine frowned. "Magda's not the type to be bothered by that. Besides he has eyes only for her. It's probably because you and I left together the night we all met."

"You think she doesn't approve?" On East 13 street, they sat facing each other at a little wooden table beneath the awning of a brasserie. Neither had mentioned it but they both wanted a drink. In their coats, it was just warm enough to sit out of doors.

"It's not disapproval, precisely. Anyway, I wonder if they're splitting the rent fifty-fifty?"

"I expect so. Magda has more money than him." Wome could not pinpoint how he knew this. "Shokare really liked Brooklyn." Wome was on the point of saying more but a waiter with North African looks had come to ask their order. Sabine ordered a whisky and Wome took a carafe of red wine.

Sabine's eyes bored into Wome's. "He's really into the idea of being with someone glamorous."

"Magda seems much less glamorous now. Perhaps Shokare allows her to feel settled." Wome felt as if he were coming to Magda's defense. "Why do you say she's complex?"

"Magda? I don't understand what she gets from the relationship. Shokare gets attention, and the prestige he pretends he doesn't crave. But the things Magda wants, he can't give her. Yes, he trails her like a new puppy but she knows it'll end badly. He'll get hurt."



"What do you think I should do?"

Sabine was affronted. "Why should *you* do anything?"

"Because....that's what friends do, no?" Wome tamped down the fear his friendship with Shokare had ended. But then he could not be sure their rapport qualified as friendship and not, at least for Shokare, the interaction between mentor and protégé.

The waiter deposited their drinks on the table and was moving out of earshot as Sabine said, "Listen." Wome let her seize his hand. "If you say something to Shokare, he'll think you're jealous of him. *He* probably is jealous already; you're much more Magda's type. I don't think Shokare is serious enough for her, ambition wise. Best to say nothing at all and be friendly to her."

In the apartment Sabine and Wome had just left, Magda was taking her turn to cook. Shokare came into the kitchen pulling a long sleeved t-shirt over his head. The fabric smothered his voice. "I thought you got on with Sabine?"

Magda did not look up. "I like her."

"It doesn't seem like it, Magda. You two were like cats around each other."

"Wome seems well."

"You were much nicer to him, I noticed."

"Well, he makes an effort. She...she didn't think much of my artifacts," Magda spoke as if she'd fashioned the masks and sculptures with her own hands. It amused Shokare to hear her misuse an English word the meaning of which differed from its Portuguese equivalent but he didn't correct her.

He nuzzled her neck. "Wome does seem well. He's a lot less tongue-tied than before although the shy guy thing might just be a routine." Magda knew nothing of his quarrel with

Wome, a silliness attributable to testosterone and which, he knew, would die a natural death. Shokare was less certain though about the animus between Magda and Sabine.

Magda scraped a mound of diced onion into her skillet. She completed her culinary preparations—filleting, grating—so quickly he feared the single mistimed stroke that would sever a finger. The consequences of this did not bear thinking about and to voice his fear was to invite just such a mishap.

He resisted the compulsion to study his reflection in the stainless steel fridge and asked, “What d’you think of their relationship? Wome and Sabine.”

“I don’t think about it.”

“Never?” Magda’s singlemindness was sometimes perturbing.

“I’ve met them twice, Shokare. They’re *your* friends.” He couldn’t argue with this. Magda seemed to need few friendships and preferred study partners. She had a boyfriend, she often said and this was enough. Or she might tell him, ‘my friends are in Paris.’ Paris, Paris but never Luanda. He’d left off asking her about Angola.

Despite or perhaps because of Sabine’s advice, Wome did not stop thinking about Shokare and Magda. He did not feel optimistic about the resumption of his relationship with the Nigerian.

In the lobby of the Tenth street bathhouse, Wome collided with a big man who had come upstairs. To steady himself, the man grabbed Wome about the upper arms, thumbs digging painfully into Wome’s biceps and he maintained a grip longer than necessary. Long hairs on his pale arms lay plastered in streaks against his skin. Beneath pouchy lids his eyes glowed in curiosity and Wome felt the round jut of belly pressed against his own. When he let go, he apologized in an accent of long purring Rs, “I beg your pardon.”

The bathhouse was an old too-warm building, shoddy and flaking, with an ugly solidity. Unclad piping stood out from the wall. A woman in a white apron ran her eyes over him and appeared to judge he was not hungry. In the horizontal glass-fronted fridge on which her chin rested was a dish of some dun-colored paste, hummus perhaps, a few sere-looking olives in a bowl and a platter of pink, weeping sturgeon roe. A small old television mounted near the ceiling emitted talk show shouts and whistles. Wome sat beneath it so he could watch the door.

It swung open to let in a triumphant Shokare. He'd grown his hair out a half inch, which softened his face and rid it of some truculence. His slim dark gray pants and thigh length cream coat were well cut but did not suit him. He gestured Wome over, and began worrying at his wrist. The attendant in thick glasses left off reading the newspaper and thrust a pair of rusted rectangular boxes onto the counter for them.

"Oga. Sorry I'm late. Hope you don't mind meeting me here. Thought it would be a change." Shokare slid his watch into one of the boxes and then did the same with a silver band from his middle finger.

"No problem." Wome removed his own watch. How're things?"

"Good. I'm actually enjoying work for once. Everything is good." Shokare giggled.

"Maybe, too good, in fact. Thanks, Sergei."

Sergei restored the lockboxes to their places as Shokare took up two towels and led Wome into a changing room misty with damp and sweat. The big man who'd bumped Wome lay on a beach chair, stomach mounding up and his face hidden beneath a wet towel.

"There are shorts over there." Shokare gestured. He stood in front of a locker a few doors down from Wome's. The piled shorts were as worn as the towels, of soft, colorless cotton that might once have been gray or beige; one pair was much like any other. Shokare sat down and began to remove his trousers. He was slimmer than Wome expected and there

"You think I've sold out, don't you? Every man has his price and you've seen mine, eh?" Shokare closed his eyes but Wome sensed he was amused. "Well, I was bitter when I said those things but not anymore."

"Why bitter?"

Shokare went down and tugged a chain that hung beside the door and a wide mouth nozzle frothed water over him. The sad-faced woman removed her robe. She was wearing a girlish two-piece swimsuit. Shokare came back and spoke in a low voice, "I suppose I felt betrayed. I grew up hearing education, education. That's all you need. So, I went to England for secondary school and then came straight here afterward. Fuck, Wome, I'm 22. I've spent eleven years in Nigeria. Only half my life. And for what? To get an education that will take me where I don't want to go." He turned to look at Wome. "So, there are two kinds of materialists, right? Most are magpies. Greedy, grasping people who want shiny things. But I feel myself turning into someone who consumes because there's no other choice. You know what Segun told me once? 'People, even strangers, will hate you if you go home with nothing because you had the chance that should have been theirs. Under the circumstances, you can't blame someone who wants to kill a ne'er do well. Kill him and he won't get a second chance. Plus, it's an exercise of the little power you do have.'"

"Are you thinking about going home?"

Shokare made a noise, like an old man's wet cough, too humorless for laughter. "I'm not thinking about anything. I could never live in Lagos again. Or even London."

The clank of escaping steam ceased and there was silence except for a steady, unseen sluicing of water. Wome took his turn beneath the shower head and braced against the shock but the water was icy for less than an instant. The rivulets ran instantly lukewarm over his arms and splashed into his nose and mouth. He stood aside to let enter a short, spare man with a sort of loincloth wound about his hips.

The brown-skinned man had begun to run his hand over the woman's bikini and she sucked in her back in an exaggerated arc, as if to taunt the room with her daring. As the man's fingers slipped beneath the bra and Wome saw a dilated nipple peek free, Shokare tapped his arm and stood. When they were outside, Shokare shook his head. "The steam is disinhibiting. I'm sure they met in that room a few minutes before we came in."

The next room blew a gust of aridity over Wome as he went in and he shut his eyes reflexively for a few seconds. He found himself inside a small low-ceilinged room with a single wavering bulb that made gargoyles of its three towel-waisted occupants. Taps ran, filling and overflowing tall plastic pails and Wome's slippers scudded on the wet floor underfoot. There were wooden boards to sit on for the marble was too hot for direct contact with naked flesh. Shokare went only as far as the second level and took a berth in the furthest corner from the furnace. Wome's eyelashes tingled with the intensity of the heat and breathing tore like an inhalation of sparks. He sat, husbanding energy and blinking to force moisture beneath his eyelids. Shokare seemed not to feel the searing in his lungs but a few minutes brought Wome to the limits of his endurance. Outside, he tried to catch his breath then he poked one foot below the surface of the plunge pool but it was too cold.

A tonsured man came downstairs carrying a branch of withered leaves and offered Wome a massage, which he refused. He tilted back his head and drank deeply from his bottle of tepid water. Shokare came out, windmilling his arms and grinning. They sat side by side, Wome sweating freely. He said, "What about going to live in your home region?"

"*Whetin* I go do for *dat* side? Sit on the farm and watch cassava grow? Plus my Urhobo isn't fluent." A woman a few years older than they came out of an unfamiliar room with a clutch of towels in her hand. Wome saw nothing extraordinary about her but Shokare was staring. "Have you ever wondered," he said "how Lanre, who's been abroad as long as I have, never doubts whether he's lost touch with reality in Nigeria? But then what's reality?"

He grunted a laugh. "When all's said and done, he'll be a rich fat *oga* and no one will give a toss that he didn't change a damn thing for anyone."

"When last were you in Nigeria?" Wome wanted to ask but Shokare seemed to be in a confidential mood, as if his secrets had been worked loose by the heat. "To be honest, I despise Segun and Tope. I've never admitted that before. I like them. But they're in thrall to this America is heaven on earth shit." He licked sweat or spit gathering at the corners of his mouth. "I prefer them to Lanre, but why does Nigeria spit out only entitled heirs or hustlers, both chasing the same shit? When I finish writing my book I'll be happy. Until then I'll stay put in New York."

He said no more but after they had washed the sweat off and Wome was in the changing room pulling up his trousers, Shokare asked, "And what about you, Mr. enigma? As Tara always says, 'What do *you* want?' You present this squeaky-clean image and then at my house. That shit you pulled with June. You and Sabine...."

Wome broke in, "What about Sabine?"

"Well, are things going well? I could see *you* settling down with an African woman."

Wome shrugged. "And I thought Tara was good for you."

"Tara?...Look, I love Tara, believe me. It was good between us. More than with Magda in some ways but different. But there's things I have now I never had with Tara."

Wome could not hold back from saying, "Maybe you find Magda exotic, Shokare, or glamorous. That's all."

Shokare threw his towel and shorts onto a heap. "What, you're an expert now?"

"I think you gave up something good. But it's none of my business."

Shokare stood up from tying his shoelaces looking thoughtful rather than put out. "You know... its weird. Tara being Black American doesn't bother me personally. It's just... I couldn't write about *Acetas* if I was married to one. I can criticize *Naijas* all I want; I am

one. But with a Black American wife, I'd be like those Black Panthers who married white women and always seemed sheepish and defensive afterward."

As usual the important questions occurred to Wome only later. He was preoccupied with the manner in which the woman's breast had been exposed. The audacity of the gesture aroused him and his mind replayed the careless caress of that uncaring brown hand time and again.

He lay now with Sabine sprawled half over him, both of them spent and sighing, wanting but unable to explain the reasons for their fierce lovemaking. He felt glad for once to hear Sabine's breathing steady as she fell quickly asleep and left him to sort through his skinned thoughts.

## November

The Vice President, Graham Moriarty telephoned Wome to summon him into his office. It seemed a bad omen that Moriarty spoke in English but he said, "Wome, listen, I need you to drop all your account stuff for right now. I talked to Kristen and she's onboard. You're gonna do a little due diligence for me. We're looking into acquisition of a medium sized advertising company based in Lyon." Wome tried to take notes but there seemed no need. He was told, there'd be weekly meetings with someone called Jeff Sleet to discuss progress and as he got up to return to his cubicle Moriarty added, "Oh, and there'll probably be a need for travel too."

Wome told Sabine about his new responsibilities onboard a train to Washington. They were going to visit his friend from Brown, Ndlovu, for a weekend. A few days had passed since his hurried meeting with Moriarty and it no longer seemed such exciting news. Nor was it exactly a promotion but Sabine was impressed.

At Union Station they got into a taxi and Wome gave the driver his friend's address. Sabine commented, looking out of the window, "It's like a pastiche. Not Paris, nor Brussels nor Vienna but with something of each."

Wome sat silent, trying to conceive of what his life might be like in this city that appeared less hurried and congested than New York. The weather was a little warmer than further North and the architecture more colorless; the buildings were of dun or grey stone, heavy and solid. Nor was autumn so far advanced that the maple trees had begun splashing the air with auburn or yellow leaves.

Their taxi driver was a stiff cheeked, fiftyish gent with a face the color of copper. In a sugary voice, he explained, "Mayor Barry's been hard done by. It gladdens me that he's back in office. Just goes to show, you can't keep a good man down." Every few moments he turned to see if they agreed with what he said, which made Sabine nervous although he was driving at reasonable speed. Wome knew the story of Marion Barry only blurrily but he nodded and tried not to grin, clutching Sabine's hand tight.

He indulged her urge to visit the Smithsonian Museum, although he would have preferred to remain indoors and catch up with Ndlovu. Saturday afternoon was spent pushing past one straggle of sightseers after another. Keeping to a languid pace through overheated, echoey museum halls tired Wome and Georgia O'Keeffe's work did not move him. Washington, he observed, when they left the galleries to take in other sights, was not so easy a city to navigate as New York.

Sabine, Wome and Ndlovu went in the evening to a Ghanaian restaurant in a busy, bright-lit part of town. They waited for their food in the restaurant's draughty interior and Ndlovu offered to take them if they were willing to an African club. Sabine asked, "Will there be zouk?" The meal was a long time in preparation and it was already eleven p.m.



when they finished. Wome had eaten too much rice and oily stew and felt himself begin to drowse but Sabine and Ndlovu chivvied him.

The night was windless but icy as, in a slow-winding queue on M street, the three of them waited to enter the club, *Fouta Djallon*. Sabine hugged Wome for warmth, clucking with admiration at the women who endured the cold in their short dresses and thin blouses.

Inside placid, plump men in suits and ties sat alone at many tables, ready with a bottle of champagne in a pail to woo whoever caught their eye. "Many of these guys are taxi drivers," Ndlovu gestured. "There's a Togolese who takes me to the airport whenever I go away that I always see here. No matter how much he dances he never removes his jacket." The DeeJay was playing Salsa but only one couple had taken the dance floor. They danced well but with showy flourishes. "It's too early to start dancing," Ndlovu explained as if Wome and Sabine were visiting provincials.

The three of them squeezed in on the unoccupied side of a table. Opposite sat three women with the air of being settled in for the evening. The tallest one, who was heavysset watched Wome from the corner of her eye. Ndlovu did not once glance across the table. Among those in ties and suspenders, Wome saw other, younger men in baggy jeans that he pointed out to Sabine. Ndlovu laughed, "These guys dressed like hood rats are new arrivals. Their brothers or uncles are still taking supporting them and they're still excited to be in the U.S. In a couple months they'll have jobs and they'll start to dress more look like him." Ndlovu was pointing at someone with his back turned. His suit jacket had been cut too long and came, like a morningcoat, almost to his knees and his trousers bagged about his waist.

Hip Hop began to play and the youths in oversize pants crowded other dancers from the dance floor. In their frantic, kicking maneuvers Wome found an echo of his secondary school classmates, or those who had diligently honed dance moves in front of the bathroom

mirror to impress girls. But the FOBs as Ndlovu called them received a wide berth from women.

The DeeJay was trying to please many constituencies and he segued frequently from one genre of music to another. The tempo now slowed and Ndlovu asked Sabine for a dance. She rose to accompany him without checking to see if Wome minded. It did not take long to see Ndlovu was accomplished at the slow gyrations of Zouk but Sabine too moved very well. Wome did not know whether to avert his eyes for with Zouk love there was no chaste way to dance. Ndlovu pressed his body tight to Sabine's as Wome set his lips in a sickly smile. As the music switched once more to salsa, Ndlovu bowed in an ostentatious gesture that Wome could not help admiring. Sabine came to sit beside him once more and he did not look at her. With a naughty little smile, she leaned over to whisper, "Because you're a pseudo francophone, I have to dance with your friend." Wome detected a little contrition in her teasing and said nothing.

Ndlovu had gone in search of another partner but the club had filled and there were very few women neither dancing nor being assiduously courted. At the next table, Wome saw a short, immaculate man in a waistcoat shift aside a still-corked bottle of champagne so it did not impede his view of the woman beside him.

Ndlovu came and sat down and Wome felt compelled to ask where he'd learned to dance Zouk. He'd become a good dancer, the Zimbabwean admitted, after the previous summer in DC. "I broke away from the Kenyans and the Zims and started to hang out with Senegalese and Ivorian cats."

Interactions and flirtations unfolded everywhere around them. Men clutched at the hands of passing women while others glowered into their cups and never working up sufficient courage to make a play. Only the women seemed truly in their element.

When the languid beat of zouk came through the speakers once more, Sabine seized Wome's hand. On the dance floor, he pressed his hands stiffly over her back and tried to stifle the feeling of drowning. Sabine led him through the languid eddy of steps and Wome relaxed and began to appreciate the slow friction of thigh against thigh. At last, he felt confident enough to raise his head and Ndlovu winked at him. The Zimbabwean's hands rested on the broad buttocks of a very short woman. "*Toi aussi!*" Wome accused Sabine in playfulness. "How come you never told me could dance zouk so well." But Sabine only leaned her head against his chest. The strobes which had blinked and spun like dervishes had now been set low to match the music. All that could be seen across the dancefloor were the shuffling, columnar forms of interlocked bodies. Each successive song was slower and sparser than the previous one and a few couples were now pressed against the wall mirrors, responding to the music as they would to the dancehall reggae that would surely come next.

The next day Wome and Sabine woke at one o'clock and hurried from Ndlovu's apartment to catch the train at two. Ndlovu went to Union Station with them and after a long, breathless run past shuttered shops they came out onto the platform, breath steaming. "You must visit us in New York," Sabine said, and Wome was pleased. He gave Ndlovu a bear hug and then they were on the train.

Sabine slept in Wome's lap and he thought about the shifted contours of his friendship with Ndlovu, and of Washington itself, a city he could not decide if he liked. It felt good to look ahead to the work week and beginning his new assignment with Moriarty. An unrelieved gray like falling ash fled past the window as they went North and each time the train slowed to a halt in a station, Wome sniffed to catch the smell of seared metal. Sabine did not turn in his lap and he watched her as if to see on her forehead and tight-squeezed eyes all those secrets he did not yet know. He dozed and then for no reason at all, his eyes opened. The train was drawing in to Newark. With the tip of his finger he stroked

the edge of Sabine's ear. The sky was a gelid blue-black and he wanted more than anything to be in bed with Sabine's legs across his. She came awake, although her eyes opened only a little and he told her, "I'm glad I came to New York." He wanted to elaborate but it unnecessary and Sabine stretched up to place small, cool fingers to his lips.

"For fuck's sake Magda." Shokare followed her into the kitchen, which she thought of as her sanctuary. "I wish you'd talk to me. Stop pretending there's nothing to talk about."

"What do you want me to say?" Magda spoke in this irritating calm way when she was unwilling to see what was plain.

"Well, who was he, to start with? You didn't say one word the whole time he was mouthing off. I thought you might go off with him."

"Why should I? I'm with you." To Magda this was the plainest, most manifest thing conceivable.

"Who is he?"

"Issa. He's Ivorian."

"Ah. So I didn't imagine the whole thing." Shokare could not say where his sarcasm sprang from. "And how do you know the sexy Issa? He seems to know *you* well. You went out with him, didn't you?"

"Why?"

"I have a right to know. When some cocky stranger tells me my girlfriend should be with him, I'm going to have some questions."

"Shokare, he was drunk. He gets obnoxious when he's had a few drinks."

With an effort, he resisted the urge to be sarcastic again. "I didn't smell anything on him. Stop washing dishes, Magda. I can tell you don't want to talk about this but if some girl came up to me and acted like that...."

"I went out with him, Shokare. *Merde*. It was a problem for him that I'm not Muslim. *Voila*. Are you happy?"

"Well, it doesn't seem to bother him any more." Shokare leaned against the fridge and tried to soften his voice. "If you're still attracted to him, tell me. I can handle it."

Magda wiped her hands on a wash towel as if there were no urgency. Then she turned to look at him and Shokare wished she hadn't. He saw many things in her eyes but no reassurance. He went into the bedroom and began slowly to undress. Then he sat in his undershorts and waited to see if Magda would follow. The heater did not seem to be working and he got into bed and lay, stiff and cold, on his side. He listened for sounds of Magda moving about the flat and in spite of his anger was falling asleep when he caught the scent of toothpaste. She came in and got beneath the covers, light enough that the mattress yielded very little under her weight. She did not come near him.

Magda seemed to consider the matter of Issa closed and Shokare became uncommunicative. She ignored his monosyllabic answers and stayed out late, ostensibly studying. But in fits of jealousy, Shokare suspected she had reestablished contact with the Ivorian or perhaps even now as he, Shokare, sat in his unheated living room, was being seduced in some Soho aerie.

He spent a few hours one evening in Harlem at a Senegalese restaurant that belonged to his friend Dabo's cousin. Shokare wanted advice but Dabo tended to say little or to be gnomic so they smoked in silence. Afterward Shokare went downtown red eyed and in a foul humour from the marijuana, feeling vicious and avid for confrontation.

The Lower East Side apartment seemed to become chillier each day. The furniture, the bright hard surfaces of fridge and stove top seemed the possessions of dispassionate, acquisitive inhabitants. This is not who I am, Shokare thought. In the kitchen, he drank several glasses of water to remove the cotton feeling from his mouth. Why had he never

noticed before that Magda's singular stamp lay on the apartment. The two of them had moved in together but nothing was his except the books.

Waiting for her to come home did nothing to improve Shokare's mood. His nerves did not allow him to sit still and he felt immune from the hunger and fatigue associated with marijuana. Rather, his stomach was a cold coil of fury.

He heard the lock turn and then the muted sound of the front door closing. Magda came into the living room and switched on the light, her face small and yellowed by the cold. She still refused to dress warmly. Magda halted when she noticed Shokare but seem unsurprised that he was slumped on the couch in his coat. She said, "I just came from the library."

Shokare watched her without raising his chin from his chest. "I hope it was fruitful."

"Yes." Magda's mouth worked in an odd way before she said, "You shouldn't have waited for me." I have to do a few more hours." Her voice was light as ever if not merry and she put her hands on her hips, elbows pointing backward.

"You don't have to stay, you know. If you leave me for your Ivorian lover now or in a month, it's all the same." But Magda went into the bedroom. He was being driven slowly mad not knowing what she would do. She came out again, and he recognized her mood's shift, but she kept going into the kitchen. He heard the click of the kettle being switched on.

In a chatty tone, Shokare called out, "He's more your type anyway. And I've decided to quit my job in the new year, so I'll be even less suitable a partner for an up-and-coming surgeon."

Magda came and stood not six feet from him. "You're going to leave your job? What will you do?"

"I'm going to concentrate on my writing. I've been feeling confident enough to write lately." Because of you, he wanted to add.

"You can write and work, Shokare." She offered not encouragement but a simple statement of fact.

Water bubbled audibly to a boil. "Not the writing I want to do."

"Are you writing a novel?" Magda's face hardly seemed to move when she spoke. Her detachment, this arid temperament which had so compelled him was now terrifying.

"Philosophy. I'm writing a critique of contemporary western society." Were it not for his own detachment Shokare might have laughed at the pomposity of this. "And I work for an advertising firm, Magda." He shivered uncontrollably. "I'm in the belly of the beast. How can I analyze the consumerist impulse?"

"My father...he wrote his best poems when he was civil servant." Magda made a little heave as if she might start to weep. Shokare let a little time pass and Magda made a small of gesture of weariness as if she intended to sit. Instead she said, "How will you live?"

"What do you mean?"

"Rent. Food. How will you afford these things if you stop working?" She had never spoken to him in this peevish voice. "I don't think you've thought about this very much."

"I haven't." He shrugged. "I don't always want to rationalize what I do. There's no rationale for being a poet, or a surgeon, One wants to or one doesn't want to."

"Are you sure you want to be unhappy the whole of your life? Because that's what will happen, Shokare. My father...he's a great poet but so, so much dissatisfied. When he was a young man, he and his cohorts—is this the right word?—they hated society for its racism, its inequality. They wanted to change the world and by blood if necessary." Magda scrubbed long fingers across her face. The weariness of the gesture was at odds with the curious brightness that had entered her voice. "The smart ones though, they gave up ideology a long time ago. They became rich. Stinking rich. My father ducks when he sees them being driven through Luanda in their BMWs and Jaguars. Do you know why?"

Shokare shook his head once. "Not because he hates them for betraying him although he says that. He lives in a slum, my father. His house is broken down and his only companion is a woman a few years older than me who he pretends is his housekeeper but who of course," Magda's laugh mocked humour, "Is his *laaver*." They lie together at night on a filthy mattress and he plays his guitar and reads his favourite poems to her, then beats her because she can't understand." She laughed again. "He wants still to change the world but even more himself. This is what you want?" Spit flew from her lips. "Regrets and dreams that..."

Shokare cut her off. "If that's what it takes."

She began to turn away. "You should discuss with someone. What does Wome say...."

"Wome has nothing to do with this. When I met Wome a few months ago he was a total parvenu. He never spoke. Ask him. I'm the one that dragged him out of his shell."

Magda looked at him. "If you say so. He's practical. And he's your closest friend; ask him what he thinks."

"Wome is very practical. Francophone too. Maybe you should have gotten together with him instead of me." Again, the only response she gave was that fragile shrug. Her silence stung Shokare and he jeered, "That's why you don't like Sabine, isn't it?" And now Magda did walk away and Shokare felt sick. Had there been something in his stomach he would have retched. He got up and put his hands on the heater but it was cold and slick. He suspected Magda was crying and went into the bedroom. There, it was even colder and the halogen lights stung his eyes. He thought Magda must be in the bathroom. His shoulders continued to shudder as if with ague and strength had seeped from his limbs. The mirror showed Shokare the rheumy eyes of an old syphilitic and blanched, ashen lips. It was nearly midnight and, fully clothed, he got into bed. He did not intend to sleep. He simply needed to get warm.



He woke at first light with a chafe at his neck from the collar of his coat. He turned onto his back, no longer cold. In the weak sunshine he blinked with an inexplicable gratitude, eager to plead and to forgive. But Magda was not in the room and Shokare knew without needing to stir from his warm hollow in the bed that he was alone in the apartment.

Wome found he enjoyed his new assignment. He'd begun spending long hours asking questions over the telephone to Brussels or Lyon. Or he might sit in the little-used Landen Jansen archives using the microfiche machines and taking notes.

"We're looking to expand into francophone markets," he told Sabine one evening in his flat as they ate a soup she'd made. "There's a good chance I'll be traveling soon."

Sabine said, "So you're happy with work?"

"Yes. But I'm worried Moriarty will realize I don't know much about due diligence. What about you?"

"I wouldn't mind a change. It would be good to live in Europe or somewhere else, no?"

Wome hadn't thought so far forward. It was enough for now to anticipate taking a business trip. He might soon be flying to Lyon with Moriarty and Jeff Sleet because Moriarty needed a more junior staffer along to interact with midlevel staff, although he hadn't specifically mentioned Wome by name. A week's trip, and after that, in less than a month, home to Douala. Shiftily, he said, "I've been preoccupied with my trip home." He did not want to broach the subject of Lyon until it was certain he would go. Evasion piled on evasion.

"Will you need a visa, *Cheri*? To come back into the country." This was another thing Wome had not thought about and for a moment it seemed to offer an escape route.

Without a visa he could not go to Douala and have a woman he did not know thrust on him.... But then he'd also miss Lyon.

The next morning, he went into Moriarty's office the next morning to inform the VP he needed to get his papers in order. Moriarty ranted at him with the door ajar. "I need you on this trip, Wome. I bust my ass to persuade Don to take you to Lyon and you don't even know if you can travel. Find out. Do whatever you have to do. And pay somebody if you have to."

Chastened, Wome went to his cubicle and tried to reach Shokare. An answering machine clicked on and then he heard Shokare's voice offering instructions and a pager number. With Betsy's help Wome paged Shokare and sat before his computer drumming his fingers and unable to work. The phone emitted its buzzy ring and Wome almost dropped it in agitation.

"Yeah, what's up?" Shokare sounded bored.

"Quick question. I need to travel for work, and I'm still on practical training. What can I do?"

"Where you going?"

Wome twirled the phone cord around his finger, trying to remain calm. "Does that matter?"

"I guess it doesn't really," Shokare let all curiosity seep from his voice. "You need advance parole. Go to 26 Federal Plaza. I think I told you about that building once." He laughed shortly. "My friend Moctar practically lives there. Go first thing tomorrow. And take your employment letter from Landen, passport, things like that. Beep me again if you need anything else." Wome hurried outside. At the corner of 28<sup>th</sup> Street he looked out into the traffic and discarded the idea of taking a taxi in favor of the subway.

Twenty-Six Federal Plaza was a massive building that seemed to squat across an entire city block and which seemed accessible through a number of different entrances. But a round-headed security guard in a brown uniform barred Wome's entry and offered the same instructions Shokare had given. "Come back early tomorrow morning." A long line of brown and black people wound its way from the building. The Hispanic guard read his thoughts, said, "The people in this line have appointment letters."

Needing solace, Wome rang Sabine from a pay phone to arrange to meet her for lunch. He caught an uptown bus and came down at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. The streets were blustery with the flurries that rose off the East River. The maple trees stood bare and the only colour in evidence came from billboards or a flash of bright scarf on a woman he passed.

Sabine was already seated in Mughal Palace, which neither rated highly. Wome had in fact grown tired of Indian food but the kitschy tawdriness of Mughal Palace offered a kind of reassurance linked to their being a couple.

Tears came to Sabine's eyes as he told her about the Lyon trip and she said, "I'll go with you tomorrow."

"Thank you but there's no need for you to take a day off."

"I don't mind, Wome."

"I know, but its not a pleasant experience, queuing, being herded. It might take all day. I'll take a book."

Sabine persisted, "Why don't you want me to go with you? And how do you know what it's like?"

"Shokare knows someone who's been fighting deportation for a year."

"And what if I insist?"

Wome tried to salve her mood. "I wouldn't stop you, *Cherie*. I'd just rather do it on my own." Sabine allowed him to move on to another subject but a tension remained.

At last, after he called for the bill, Wome could not put off asking, "Does it bother you I may go to Lyon?"

Sabine blew hair out of her eyes. "I'm happy for you, Wome. But what if we're not compatible because you have some jet set career and I'm stuck in New York being felt up by Salvadoran envoys in the UN cafeteria." She broke out laughing at the absurdity of this a moment before Wome did.

Later, at home, as she dried herself from the shower, Sabine asked innocently, "So what exactly will you be doing in Lyon?"

Wome straightened up from her chipped ivory-toned sink. "Spending time with midlevel and junior staff, trying to get a different perspective of the company."

Sabine pursed her lips. "So, lots of long boozy lunches, late nights in bars." She seemed less anxious but when they were beneath the sheets Sabine ran cautious hands over Wome, as though the bones of his chest and hip were unfamiliar. Afterward she sat up, dry-eyed and smoked a cigarette at the edge of the bed. Wome watched her back.

Very early the next morning he got up, washed and dressed. Sabine gave him a drowsy kiss and rolled over directly back into deep sleep. Outside the sky was an inky blue. On the subway platform it felt very cold but a train came shortly. Transit workers in red and yellow bibs slept outstretched, spent from the nightshift and lethargic in the subway car's heat. Their lanterns and other gear cluttered the aisle. Wome stood near a door and tried to imagine what it might feel like to pass seven or eight hours moving through draughty, inundated tunnels.

It was not yet seven a.m. but at 26 Federal Plaza thirty people preceded him in line. The Africans had come swaddled like babies but the Latinos, hatless and in thin jackets, seemed immune to the weather. There was much stamping, hand rubbing and ostentatious pluming of breath to elicit a response from the security guards. Twenty minutes passed

before Wome reached the door. After he entered, the guard stationed there raised an arm to bar the way. There were three other security officers, all plump and with bored expressions on their faces. They carried old-fashioned holstered pistols. One of them now gestured that Wome should place his bag in a tray to be X-rayed.

The vaulted lobby was hivelike with activity. Men and women hurried or stared as if bewitched. On the eleventh floor, a guard dressed in blue serge, told Wome, "Take a number; have a seat. When they call your number, go up to windows 5 through 14." From the dispenser on the wall Wome peeled the number 97. There was a drone of anticipation in the big room, a nervous energy ratcheted up by those who hovered against the walls rather than sit. People talked in quiet, edgy voices, and once or twice Wome heard wary laughter. Even children were infected by the tension; one girl of about six who stood next to her father, took in the room with big, unreadable eyes. Wome counted more Latin Americans than others but there were several South Asians too. Of Africans he saw fewer than a dozen.

A voice came over the tannoy: number 82. Wome, fished out his paperback book from his bag and settled to wait. There seemed no rhythm to the intervals at which numbers were called. Every few moments Wome's eyes wandered away from the page and he was aware of waiting for the next number. People continued streaming into the room. Shortly after 91 was called he surrendered his chair to a small bright-eyed Indian woman who thanked him in Hindi.

Ninety four and 95 came and went and though Wome strained to hear 96 through the growing growl of voices, it did not come. And then he heard 97, his number, at window seven.

Wome experienced an oppressive sensation walking, as a condemned man might, through the tight corridor formed by waiting bodies. Men drew in their legs only at the last moment to let him pass. He hoped it would be a woman waiting at window seven, but found

instead an Asian man. He smiled a terse greeting from behind the transparent barrier, businesslike and blasé at once. Wome guessed he might be anywhere between thirty and forty years old. "Good morning." Wome enunciated carefully. "I'm here to apply for advanced parole."

"Can I see your passport?" Wome slid it through the gap beneath the inch-thick glass and the official made the pages flicker as though showing off a party trick. "Do you have a letter of employment? Why do you need advance parole?"

"I have to attend a business meeting in France in two weeks."

He scanned the papers and stared expressionless at Wome. Then after a moment he took up the passport again, "Wait here," and vanished through a door behind him.

At window eight, to Wome's right, a thin harried-looking Indian was also seeking advance parole. It seemed he wanted to go home because his father was ailing. The official at window eight was a smudged looking white male with Coca-cola bottle glasses and a sour curl to his mouth. But he was polite; he accepted the Indian's passport before asking him pleasantly to sit and wait. This immigration officer now also passed through the door at his back. Some more-senior bureaucrat must sit there in an office and he—Wome felt certain it was a man—was the final arbiter on weighty decisions. And yet this faceless official was spared the soiling necessity of looking into pleading faces, which did not seem just.

No number had been called but a stocky Hispanic-looking man in a cowboy hat now approached window eight, and stood shyly a little to one side of it. The official at window eight came out again, empty-handed, and Wome saw his face change to see someone at his window. He stood before the glass and said, "I didn't call any number. What number have you got?"

The brown-skinned petitioner pushed back his cowboy hat with a knuckle and spoke some words that were inaudible. To Wome, standing a few feet away it sounded like a mixture of Spanish and English.

"Speak up, man. I can't hear you." The Latino retrieved from his pocket a worn slip of paper which he passed across. The official took a look at it and rolled his eyes wildly. "Ninety four! Ninety four!" He bawled. "That number was called ten minutes ago. Ten minutes," and he extended all his fingers as though suddenly aware there might be a language gap. "Where've you been? Skip out for coffee? Take a quick nap, perhaps?" The immigration officer inclined his head against steepled hands and pantomimed a snore. To this, the Hispanic said something else in Spanish and smiled as if he too were in on the joke. But the official slammed his fist on the counter. Wome wished the one who'd taken his passport would return so he could avert his eyes. Behind him, the entire room seemed also to watch, with mingled relief, fear and resentment.

In a more conversational tone, the white officer leaned toward the glass and said, "Do you realize people like you screw up the process for everyone else." Then he offered a mumbling aside to the black woman on his left, who smiled noncommittally.

A heavysset young woman stepped up to window eight and received a look of surprise from the man in the cowboy hat. She said to the official in heavily accented English, "he only speaks Spanish"

"Aha!" The officer seemed to find something on which to pounce. "Progress. Are you his advocate?" But the two Hispanics were conversing in rapid Spanish. The woman was so short the stetson's long brim hid her face from Wome.

The Asian officer reemerged and smiled in an encouraging way at Wome. "We'll try to process your advance parole as quickly as possible but we can't guarantee it'll be ready in

two weeks." Wome accepted his passport beneath the glass. "We're quite backlogged here. But you should receive an appointment letter within ten days."

The enigma of this outcome left him in a strange mood. It felt like a compromise and yet the promise of an appointment letter was better than flat refusal. A tentative, autumn sunshine shone on Broadway and the sidewalk teemed with shopping foreigners with English accents, or visitors conversing in German. The image of the Latino man and his helpless grin came back to him. He distracted himself looking up at the World Trade Center, the top of which seemed to be swaying. Not pay attention to where he was walking, Wome bumped into a man in a multihued laboratory-style coat who snarled something at him. Wome only smiled. He drank stale black coffee in a tiny delicatessen on Wall Street and decided there was little reason to prolong his truancy. He had little use for freedom

His appointment letter failed to come in time and Moriarty and Sleet travelled to Lyon without him. Wome derived a sliver of comfort that there was no one else that could go in his place. Three days later, the appointment letter arrived in his mail box in a stiff white envelope. The INS were offering him a 7:30 a.m. appointment on a day of his choosing in the next two weeks.

On a day of more piercing cold than any so far that autumn Wome stood in a different line at 26 Federal Plaza, which moved no quicker. In his passport was attached a letter that set out terms under which he could leave and enter the country. This was valid, not for a whole year, but nine months and Wome again experienced the clouded satisfaction of having reached some dubious settlement.

December



Shokare called Wome to give him an address and invite him to stop in at a friend's place one Wednesday.

A tall languid woman admitted Wome to the second floor apartment and she introduced herself as Amy. Shokare had made it sound a casual get-together but, trailing Amy, Wome found three strangers and Shokare sitting over the remains of a candlelit meal. Shokare was listlessly prodding food about his plate but he looked up and smiled to see Wome but the other three scarcely seemed to notice. The man was recounting in a wry, exaggerated way some anecdote about a soap opera actress that he'd worked with. Breathless still from the cold outdoor air, Wome accepted a glass of wine. Shokare and himself were much younger than everyone else at the table. Wome guessed Jonathan had told this story many time. The women flanking him laughed in anticipation. Nonetheless they leaned in until both were almost touching him. There was a tautness in the room unrelated to the sinister light of guttering candles. Amy glanced often toward Shokare whose half smile and downcast eyes were like a grimace.

There was more rehearsed laughter at the end of Jonathan's story. Amy said, "This is Wome, Shokare's friend," and shot a look of appeal at her girlfriends, Tabitha and Irene. Jonathan gave Wome a brisk wave. Shokare lifted his chin and gave Wome a sharply malicious bat of the eyelids. As if expanding on Amy's introduction he announced, "Wome has jungle fever. In a big way."

There was a puzzled silence. "As in the Spike Lee movie?" Irene wanted to know.

"Of course." Shokare was magnanimous. "Wome's one of only very few believers in the U.S, which is a great pity because I've seen research suggesting that federal subsidies for interracial marriage could alleviate many of this society's problems."

"Such as?" Tabitha's voice was inflectionless. There was a conversation to be pushed on and she did so.

"Well, take black women for instance." Shokare began to warm to his theme. Jonathan's hands made a peak at his lips but he seemed impatient rather than attentive. Wome felt at a remove from these five people, as if he were sitting alone in another room entirely, and unmoved by the bright words coming from his friend's mouth in a now-familiar, too-English way. What Shokare was saying seemed to touch on Wome only lightly and it was with a start he perceived the Nigerian's aura of enigma had lifted. Behind this realization came a cold incuriosity Wome did not want to probe too closely. He was indifferent too to apprehensive Tabitha and to Irene who appeared fascinated by Shokare's glibness and could not conceal it.

"... If black women are incentivised to marry white men, they might begin to take notions of eligibility seriously, rather than merely settling for any black man. But its actually for white women that compulsory miscegenation holds most promise." Shokare relished the word miscegenation and stared Jonathan in the eye as he said it. He picked up his glass and Wome thought he might raise it above his head in a salute to absurdity. Wome too wet his lips, needing wine for what was to come.

"Pair middle class white women with innercity thugs and you would expunge lingering guilt from slavery, demystify the black phallus, and also take a massive step toward shoring up fragile black masculinity all at once. For the first time in U.S. history, you'd see solidarity between black and white women as each could now counsel the other on practical man issues."

Wome acknowledged some sympathy for Amy as he sat listening among the long shadows. Amy alone seemed to want no part in either the voyeurism of her friends nor in Shokare's trick for she did not look up once.

"But, most importantly, there'd be no more fag haggery, which is a waste of resources. Some queens would suffer but really only from lack of attention."

"Shokare, stop." Amy sounded appalled rather than angry. Her face was no longer pale.

"Amy, it's fine." said Jonathan. "He's been ignored and so he getting nasty." He gave Shokare a pitying look, "You're bitchier than any fags I know. Nice theory, whatever your name is, but you're still boring. And a homophobe."

"I'm not in the least homophobic." Shokare smiled back glassy-eyed. "You didn't accuse me of racism when I mentioned black thugs. You can't deny, Jonathan," Shokare soughed the name as if he'd developed a lisp, "There's lots of affluent complacency in the gay community."

"How do you know what gay men are up to?"

Shokare shrugged. "I live in New York." Wome waited for one of the women to interpose but Tabitha seemed abashed as Amy and Irene plainly found this haggling engrossing.

"And you just happen to have some sort of amateur interest in queer behavior?" Jonathan flashed the whites of his eyes. Wome contemplated getting to his feet and walking out, unless he dragged Shokare with him no one would even notice.

"And fag haggery." Shokare bit back a laugh.

"Fuck you." Tabitha sounded pitiless.

Amy's cheeks were burning but Shokare had not finished. He mock-recoiled and in a voice of exaggerated innocence said, "Why? Fag haggery is high-status, post-maternity, affluent. Being a fag hag says to the world: the only people hip enough for me are queens."

"Fuck you." three voices spat at once. Jonathan no longer seemed quite so indifferent. Wome stood up and grabbed Shokare's arm, pulling him to his feet. He was smirking at all of them and Jonathan rose to as if he expected a fight. Amy appealed once more in that hapless murmuring voice, "Shokare. Please stop."

A few minutes later they were walking East on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street shoulders bumping. The wind had fallen but the air was nonetheless like ice against Wome's face. Wome tried to make sense of offering apologies to strangers on Shokare's behalf. At last he said, "Why did you do that?"

"Fuck off." Shokare was amiable and, Wome suspected, sober. His voice boomed in the stillness. He let a little time pass before he admitted, "Too cozy a set up. These gossip, bitchy scenes get on my tits."

"That bitchy scene was your friend's dinner party. And all those comments about jungle fever, they had nothing to do with me, did they? You've been involved with Amy." Wome laughed at the richness of it. "Why else would she invite two twenty-year-olds to her dinner party." Wome had listened to him so often it was easy to mimic Shokare now, his accent but also his irresistible, sleek way of talking and seeming clever. "Let me guess, You met Amy at an art gallery, impressed her with your insight about art history." They turned south at Eighth Avenue and it astounded Wome how obvious the whole thing was, how easily he could piece together events from observations. Amy's shame, her inability to call Shokare down over his nastiness. As if some all seeing spirit were whispering in his ear, Wome went on, "She'd just broken up with her boyfriend and was a bit vulnerable. And of course you seemed so cynical, witty and mature."

Shokare scrubbed his grinning face then hooted. "You think you're awfully clever, my dear, Wome. You've come a long way, baby. Not such a JJC any more." Then he lurched into the street to halt an approaching cab. The South Asian driver halted but as he got a good look at them he seemed on the point of pulling away again. Shokare though was too spry and, tugging open the rear door, he clambered in.

As they were moving southward on Lafayette Wome said, "So, what's going on with Magda?"

Shokare's laugh held an edge of triumph. "C'mon." He rapped on the plastic partition with his fist and lurched from the cab to tumble bills into the driver's hand. He strode up to the entrance of a nightclub clogged with young Japanese women in short skirts and fur boots. The distant woof of music mingled for a moment with the grind of the Lexington line train beneath his feet. He did not want to go in, but Shokare's arm came about his shoulders.

Pangaea's interior had been done up in chessboard black and red squares. Shokare leered at a pair of women traipsing past in thigh boots. He ordered two vodkas and led a yawning Wome into the club's main room. Bobbing his head distractedly to the sparse syncopated rhythm, Shokare said, "Forget about Sabine for tonight." Pangaea seemed to draw only aspirant models and latter-day pimps; midweek revelers who need not see the near side of noon. Taking a suck of vodka, Wome many people drinking Champagne but no one swigging from the bottle. Shokare matily took Wome by the shoulders once more as if he'd received a signal and marshaled him through to a small, shabby room. The music being played here was softer, meditative rather than hip hop and its occupants all wore glazed expressions.

Wome recognized June, the model booker he'd kissed. Sitting with her on a couch were two other women he didn't know. Shokare thrust in beside June and made room too for Wome. June raised string-thin eyebrows at Wome but it was a greeting rather than a sign of recognition. The skin above her top lip was hectic and blood-flushed. Béata smiled but June's other companion, Tia, a black waif with a seventies-style afro and bright purple eyelids was drawing on a rolled cigarette. June accepted it from her and gave it to Shokare.

"Be careful," Shokare said as he exhaled but Wome refused. He was staring at June who did not look at him. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Shokare tuck his hand down the back of her jeans and then he and June were kissing. Tia pulled Béata along toward

the main room, both tripping in their absurdly high boots. The long ruby nails of June's fingers clasped Shokare's throat and Wome experienced a faint sense memory of the strange metallic taste in her mouth and the broken feel of her tongue.

June began to construct another hybrid cigarette. She patted out some and cannabis and slipped a vial of cocaine deftly from her bag. Wome said, "I'm going home." He had seen enough.

Shokare looked at him, "I wanted to talk to you for a bit."

"About what?"

"About... Listen, Magda and I aren't together anymore. It didn't work out."

"Alright. So you're not cheating on her." Wome shrugged.

"Don't you care what happened?" Shokare seemed like a little boy, an effect increased by the shadows.

"Tell me."

"She left me."

Fatigue made Wome curt. "Why?"

"She went back to a former boyfriend. An Ivorian. She didn't tell me this, but I'm certain it was for him."

"How d'you know?"

"Magda and I bumped into him." Shokare made a gesture of helplessness. June went about drug assembly as though nothing else mattered. "Actually, he came up to Magda in a restaurant, acting very familiar, flirting. Magda's supposed to be *with* me. She herself knows it." Shokare's mimicry of a francophone accent fell flat "Very cocky guy, a bond trader or something. This was about three weeks ago."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, she tried to reassure me a little. But I saw through it. She left me a note...after she left." Shokare laughed with a noise like crackling. He put his hand on June's shoulder as though to reassure her. "She said she'd be back to get her stuff. No 'I really loved you' or any such crap."

As usual there were a great many questions. "So how do you know where she went?"

Shokare said simply, "I know Magda."

"What will you do about the apartment?"

"Fuck the apartment." Shokare tried to sound careless. "I'll sublet." I can't stay there." He turned away to take the rolled cigarette from June.

Wome stared again, repulsed and enticed at once by June. He stood up. Fatigue had lifted from him but he saw no reason to stay. "I'm going." Shokare's eyes were red rimmed with smoke. Then a new thought came to Wome, a kind of fresh clarity. "So is June just a comfort fuck?" Shokare stared but said nothing. Remember your own warning, Wome wanted to say but instead he went out.

Sabine was awake still. She read Wome's mood from the terseness of his answers. He was too pent up to get into bed. And in one shot he told her about the entire evening. Knees drawn up, she watched him from beneath the covers.

"You're worried he's going to become a coke head?"

"I don't know. At least with Magda he seemed stable."

"Well, my guess is his pride is hurt more than anything. I'm not sure you should worry about him."

"I don't know, Sabine. Mindlessly, Wome readied for sleep. Sabine's eyes searched his face after he lay down and he said, "I'll call him tomorrow."

"That's a good idea." She was sleepy. "Talk to him when he's sober."

Two weeks after he'd been granted advance parole, Wome flew to Montreal. Sabine seemed both happy and sad he was going and gave him some phone numbers. "You can go and pay your respects to my parents."

In the three days of his trip there was scarce time to see the city. Mostly, he sat in boardrooms at the top of skyscrapers. In these fact-finding meetings that involved four or five other people, nothing was asked of Wome and he volunteered little. He found the habit of these plump whiskery men to insert English words arbitrarily endearing and listened to what was said as though to a language only half-learned, busying himself with note-taking. If he thought of questions, these were turned over in his head and then allowed to die unasked.

Wome's first glimpse of Montreal came through the prism of dusk and he experienced initial disappointment. The city resembled a Manhattan constructed of red brick, albeit one with winter far in advance. Montreal's rhythms differed. An abrupt darkness swooped around four o'clock and the city's downtown seemed to rise and fall throughout evening. As Wome returned from his all-day meetings a little after five o'clock, a heavy northern chill unabated by the street lights lay over the unpeopled streets. A little later, around seven pm perhaps, if he ventured out in his woolen hat and thermal underclothes the sidewalks were busier.

He wondered if Montrealers took siesta. In any case, it was a city that appeared engaged in a rearguard action against the damp and claustrophobia of long nights. Steadily the noise and activity built until shortly after eleven, the coming and goings began sharply to subside. The cold made Wome lethargic and from his third floor hotel room he could see as he got ready for sleep the scattered lights of nearby bars. A few blocks over a late motorcycle snarled its eagerness to be away. Otherwise silence.

During a coffee break, he was staring out of the window of a conference room and a woman told him, "You are lucky. At this time of year we sometimes have five feet of snow."



He went without lunch to see Montreal in the watery sunshine of daylight and found its inhabitants a hodgepodge. Boiler suited men sat in the many parks, drawling asides to one another around their cigarettes and waiting, Wome supposed, for plumbing jobs. Buskers strummed songs half in English, half in French to crowds of as many as forty although he never saw more than a few coins in their caps. Outside the office where his meetings were, Wome observed few people in business suits. The subway cars were choked with young people he took for students; they were less stylish than their counterparts in New York. Three teenaged girls in clunky heels and fingerless gloves eyed him through kohl-dark lashes. Montreal appeared to be full of Africans, Antilleans, brown people living middle class lives.

"It's a blue-collar New York," he blurted over the phone to Sabine and then wanted to take it back. She laughed, sounding warm and snug wherever she was, and a little wistful. She told him to go and eat sardines in the Portuguese neighbourhood. "Not yet," Wome told her after she asked if he had used any of the telephone numbers.

On his last day in Montreal Wome met Mario, Sabine's high school classmate. He was taken by Mario and his Haitian girlfriend, Therese, for sushi in a district of the city far from his hotel that was residential and quiet. The restaurant was a converted house with a garish, smoky interior and none of the clean, straight lines Wome associated with Japanese restaurants. The rooms rang with the raucous talk and laughter of diners and the service was laboured.

Mario blended French and English, and said this was to help Therese practice, but it was a shrewdness, Wome saw, that allowed him to speak his mind on sensitive matters.

"But you're a Francophone, why are you in New York?" He chided Wome. "This is a much more civilized city for someone like you." Mario's eyes were avid in his big-cheeked, impish face.

Wome was noncommittal. "Don't you like New York?"

Mario puffed out his cheeks out in a very French gesture of self mockery. "I have not yet been, but it is a city you can know from films, no? Or from novels. People compare Montreal to New York, but we are not the same at all." His accent was more pronounced than Sabine's and he sounded as though fingers were clamped over the bridge of his nose. "Our Montreal, it takes time to know her, she shows herself gently, shyly, not entirely from choice, eh, these winters, you know. But when you know her, she is yours. New York is also a woman, not a loose woman though you assume this is what I will say, but a creature of... exteriority. Hard but able to surprise because she changes often and does not always know her own mind." Self satisfied, he sat back and rested his arm across Therese's plump shoulders.

Worne did not want to be drawn into a formal debate, He said, "I've been schooled in English since I was ten. So I don't need to be in a francophone country. I like Montreal."

"But what about race relations in America? Canada, or at least Quebec is so much more comfortable with race. Haitians, Togolese, Mauritians; all are here, all at home here. In America Whites worry so much they will say the wrong thing, Blacks think Whites are having racist thoughts. A lot of tension."

"There are no racists here?"

"Maybe." Mario was willing to make concessions. "Of course some are. But here it's a way of life. Our antipathy is toward America, or Anglophones. Toward Francophones we feel only kinship.

"And what about Francophones who don't conform?"

"Ah but there is nothing to conform to. We are all the same. Quebecois value family, community; Africans and Haitians, they are the same, no? Food, life, what do you think, Therese?"

She first turned, soft-eyed, to Mario, before venturing to say in English, "I come from Saint Anne de Bellevue. We are a large Haitian community there. I didn't know too many white Quebecois until I came in Montreal. But I have no problem." She pronounced it pwoblem.

After the excellent meal, Mario looked ruddy and puffed up with Sake. He leaned in to ask over the din if Wome and Sabine had begun trying for a baby. The bill had been promised five minutes before; the restaurant's clangour had dropped almost to nothing. Caught by surprise, Wome almost choked. But Mario was beaming at Therese and in return she gave him a worshipful look. In this exchange Wome observed the fact of Therese's pregnancy and in a flash understood too Mario's optimism about a nonracist Montreal. The couple so brimmed with parental anticipation and love they accepted his quiet congratulations and failed to notice he made no answer.

Many nights, Shokare and June smoked, snorted and fucked but the cocaine had begun to play a shivery itchiness across his skin. The sex had become not brutal so much as clinical, a riding out of chemicals in the system. June was indifferent to activity that took time away from getting high on a winter evening: A couple of lines, a gin and tonic, a marijuana joint, more gin, perhaps a cokie smokie, another line or two and then one last puff of cannabis to fall asleep. In the interval after the drugs' first flush through the blood, June didn't speak; in fact she did nothing that Shokare could see. Listless fingers flicked over the television remote control but June was forever drawn elsewhere and absent unless chopping out or rolling.

Shokare had begun to contemplate leaving her. Revulsion fed him dark thoughts. He might rob her though on the way out. June maintained about the apartment a stash of bills to pay her dealer, Sim. She was careless with money. But Shokare never knew how

much cocaine was lying around at any moment nor which other drugs she kept. June stowed these in a well-chosen nook and took care to never let him see.

She had no friends but occasionally went out socially with models she represented. Girls as fond of cocaine as June and uninterested in conversation, even to compare druggy notes. Shokare went once to meet June at an East Village bar he'd never noticed. She and three models were the only patrons and he felt as soon as he came up to the table that the harsh yellow lighting should have sent them all scurrying to conceal painted faces and emaciated throats. Restive, they sat with their legs contorted one over the other and refused to meet his eye.

Shokare tried talking to June, prying to understand what she was trying to self-medicate with opiates and stimulants. But he received no confessions. Only blank looks, or a proffered joint. It was boredom, he concluded. June was rich; she didn't need money, didn't need anything except drugs. A self-imposed necessity.

Aversion didn't stop him from partaking though, joining her nightly jags, although he kept the cocaine to a minimum. And he sat in the armchair of her Spartan living room rather than beside her on the couch, so was forced to walk over to take a drag. Then he returned to the other end of the room like a butler. If June noticed the imposition of physical space between them she never commented.

He was sunk low in the armchair, pulling on a beedi and watching her, through a fog of colors, being June: subtly in motion, febrile, itching her scalp. Tonight the television was off and music never played. The time was nine o'clock and Shokare felt spry, not at all minded to sit through the night swooping up to tumble down again. He decided to go to the bookstore at Astor Place and perhaps do some writing afterward, as June slept.

"I put some smack Sim gave me in this spliff." June only called cocaine charlie now. She was so faithful customer Sim kicked in little bonuses from time to time. She mentioned

the dealer often; he offered June advice on buying property, even bonds. Shokare had never seen the man and imagined Sim as a homunculus that perched on June's shoulder as they transacted business. A minor devil peddling euphoria and stock tips.

"Yeah?" Shokare said, unsurprised. He knew she mixed the drugs and didn't tell him. Perhaps this explained his calmness. "I'm off to Barnes and Noble. I need to do some research." He pulled on his shoes and said, "Don't wait up." June came to meet him at the door and kissed him with a deliberate caress. Shokare ignored the flare of arousal.

Out of doors, it was not so cold; a slow wind blew with a smell like rain. Bareheaded, he walked east to Broadway and then North. After he crossed Houston street, the sidewalks were busier and he looked into the eyes of men and women hurrying past. How many of them had smoked or honked against the cold or from boredom before they went out. He laughed but it rang falsely in his ears.

Barnes and Noble was over lit, neither full nor empty. He went upstairs to reach the fiction section as a book reading was finishing. All the chairs were occupied but he was glad to stand; there remained in his head a little muzziness from June's cigarette. He'd never squatted on the hardwood floor like the black-tongued Goth kids, who he imagined went among the stacks to agree suicide pacts even as they pretended to read Japanese comic books.

Shokare flicked through an Amis, a Farah, Rushdie—he'd scanned them before—then moved toward the magazine racks.

Next to the magazine racks was the café. The comings and goings there, and bids for attention, cruising and propositioning were a distraction even if one merely observed. But there was no one there now besides one homeless man with an air of jaded respectability. Shokare had seen him in many places in the East Village.

The doors were shuttered, and Shokare left empty-handed. A garbage truck kept him company on his way into Soho. The accumulation of refuse trailed a fishy stink across long blocks despite the cold and although the truck stopped at each corner to take on more waste, Shokare failed to outdistance it before he turned aside from Broadway.

He let himself into June's apartment, glad to feel warmth on his face. He undressed and rinsed his face with warm water before he slid into bed. June lay on her ribs with her back toward him, thick hair shrouding her shoulder and neck. He remembered the kiss she had given him and began to stroke her arm. The skin above her elbow felt very dry. She was usually a light sleeper but she did not stir.

"June," He whispered once, then repeated himself in a normal voice. He sat up and put his hand on her shoulder so he could peer into her face and unresisting, she rolled over at that slight pressure. As she settled onto her back a drop of blood ran like a tear across her cheek. "Shit." Shokare ducked his head to her breast. There was no heartbeat and the pale flesh was distinctly chalky and very slightly cool. Shokare jumped up to reach the telephone and then hesitated in the doorway of the bedroom, trying to see some way out, to avoid becoming embroiled. "Shit," he said again, fearing the whoop of sirens. On impulse he came back to the bed. June's thin chest did not stir. Shokare struck her breastbone with the heel of his palm, a little above the point where the ribs knit together. He was not sure what effect this had but he tried again, even more sharply and with a ragged sawing intake of air, June jackknifed up into a sitting position, coughing and gagging. Flecks of warm spittle struck Shokare's cheeks and eyelashes. On his knees, he squeezed her to his chest and then relaxed his hold. A tepid seep of blood fell on his chest. He listened to her breathing become regular but neither of them said anything. Shokare did not know how to convey how near she had been to death.

At last, June unclasped his middle and together they lay down as if it had only been a nightmare. She fell asleep and Shokare cupped June's body with his, listening to her exhalations. Far off a police siren whirred and he smiled in relief but he lay awake deep into the morning unable to swallow his shame. You can't forget you're Nigerian, he told himself and laughed softly like a dying man. This fact alone might suffice to implicate him.

The feeble heat of wan December sunshine on his eyelids roused him, bone tired and alone. Shokare staggered up from the bed and as he shuffled from the room some mood of anxiety kept him from calling out. Through the ajar door sat June at the little dining table that she never used for eating, half-turned so he saw only her legs bared by a short skirt, and the elasticised strip of bra pressed tight against her back. But the familiar rat-a-tat tapping of a plastic edge against glass came to him and after the sleepless worrying of the night it was more than he could bear. Shokare came up beside the table before he could stop himself and the back of his hand swept the little mirror to the floor, kicking powder into the air and spilling across the carpet. "What the fuck are you doing? You OD'd last night. Your heart stopped. Shit, June, is this some weird death wish?"

June stabbed at his crotch with her foot. "You shit," and he dodged back, anger seeping away at the unexpected response. "That's the best coke money can buy." June fell on her knees, her hand scraping uselessly across the carpet. He watched her. What did he care really? Spitting, her eyes pinched and bloodshot, June got unsteadily to her feet and sobbed, "Get out. Get out of my fucking house." Her hand came up to cover one breast as if Shokare were a lecher.

Shokare stared at the fine film of scattered powder at his feet and he almost laughed. What an absurd idea that he could save June from herself, as if he too did not need a savior. Panting, he said, "Gladly. That's a very good idea." He gathered his things from the bedroom, socks, underwear, books, and dropped them into his old bag. June watched from

the threshold, hands crossed over her breasts, to make sure he did not steal. He ignored her for an image of rape filled his head for an instant. He doused his face with cold water and slung his bag over his shoulder. His shirt remained unbuttoned beneath his coat and the laces in his shoes flicked at every step but he went out just the same, expected a parting shot from June at the front door. None came.

Moriarty was pleased with Wome's typed up scribbles from Montreal. The bubble Wome feared would soon burst continued to hold. Both he and Sabine were eager to get away from New York for a time. Half a year had elapsed in the blink of an eye and now the end-of-year peddling had begun in earnest so they lay low. No word came from Shokare and Wome did not make contact; he was husbanding his energy, which was being depleted by monotony of frosted windows and baleful late sunrises. He hated the first cold touch of the sheets on his skin as he inched into bed.

Not long before he would leave for Cameroon, he came up to Harlem and went into Teranga, a tiny Senegalese restaurant so cold that Shokare and his friend Dabo were sitting with their coats on. A pot of tea stood in front of Shokare, but he insisted on ordering sorrel for Wome, who took one sip and found it too astringent. But he nursed it rather than admit he did not like the taste.

Shokare broke off his conversation with Dabo to tell Wome, "a couple of Senegalese guys say people around here have been shouting 'faggot' when they go past."

"Faggot?"

Shokare laughed. "Yeah, it's the jeans. Show him, Dabo." Dabo threw back his coat and stood, revealing jeans neither tight nor loose and cinched closely around his waist.



Dabo was taller than Wome and just as thin, with a beak of a nose. "Acatas think only a queen would wear this style of jeans."

Wome had no response to this so he asked, "How's June?"

"Probably dead." Shokare kissed his teeth. He looked at Wome. "So you're off in a few? You got all the goodies for the folks in the village? You're in for a shock, my friend."

"As in culture shock? Even though I don't have a big job or an *Oyinbo* wife. Yet."

"You just wait, laughing boy. You'll see. First off you'll have outgrown all your childhood friends and they'll hit you up like an American tourist. Money, clothes, whatever. And Douala itself....a day or two of being back will convince you you could never live there again."

"You're very pessimistic." Wome let a little *bissap* trickle past his lips, trying not to wince at the sourness.

"Oga, I won't say any more. But listen to your Uncle Shok, he'll always, always give it to you straight." Shokare shivered and stretched out his legs.

"What about you? Are you staying here?"

"I'm going to London to see my Mama. She's not doing so well. Luckily my student visa doesn't expire till February. So I'll be in New York for Christmas then New Year's in London."

"Is it serious?"

"I suspect so but who knows. She doesn't take care of herself. And my father doesn't give her a lot of money."

When it came, the *Tiebu djeun*—fish and rice with cassava in tomato sauce—was very good, if not so hot. Dabo left the restaurant with Wome and Shokare after they paid for the meal, but he loped off toward East Harlem. "Let's go have a drink," Shokare suggested but the unaccustomed food sat heavily in Wome's belly and he begged off. He felt thankful

Sabine lived mere stops away. Shokare seemed to read his mind. "More uxorious by the day, eh?" he jeered. "You're not taking Sabine to Cameroon by any chance, are you?" Wome simply raised an eyebrow, too tired to answer and unwilling to confess he didn't understand this word.

Sabine didn't know it either but she hunted out her dusty dictionary and looked it up. "Doting upon, or affectionately submissive toward one's wife," she said and straddled him, letting her weight rest on his overfull stomach. "Is that right, ma chere, you're doting?" She pressed his wrists into the mattress. "So will you miss me?" Her tone was at odds with the posture of the schoolyard bully. "While you're away?"

He looked up at her. "But you know I will."

"And you'll be good? She leaned forward to emphasize the question's importance. "No village girls creeping into your bed?"

Now he did laugh. "That's what you imagine girls in the village do? Is this the Sabine Montfort I know? Miss aloof herself worrying about my behavior in Bafut, of all places." His face went serious as he remembered with a little prick of guilt Sabine knew nothing of his mother's threat. "What about you?" He teased back. "You've got cold, cold nights to look forward to. Old boyfriends too. Will you behave?"

"I wish I could go with you." Sabine relaxed her grip but did not get down. I want to meet your parents. And Kah. Plus, North America is all the same at Christmas. I'd love to experience a completely different sort."

Wome laughed, alarmed by this reverberation of Shokare's taunt. To think of his arriving in Douala hand in hand with an unmentioned, white girlfriend. Franz and Marguerite would welcome Sabine, he knew, the more so because she was Francophone. But he himself would be acutely self-conscious—his mind shied from the word embarrassed. The house in which he'd grown up would seem rude, simple and his parent's circumstances

modest. And he and Sabine would never be permitted to share a bed. Marguerite would quell the very idea with a look.

Sabine's eyes were shrewd. "You're not ready for that, eh? Well, I wasn't hinting. It's just a bit of fantasy. But I'd like to see you around your family."

Sabine lay at last with her cheek against Wome's ribs and he said, "I will miss you," but it sounded an afterthought. He had become too preoccupied. This was what life offered, a series of little anxieties. "We should go away somewhere in the New Year. Just us two." But the quiet moments at home with Sabine were the ones he relished.

Outside the Fort Greene Apartment, Wome hugged Sabine and kissed her for the last time on a too-warm December night. Everything that ought to be said had already been communicated in the previous days and so he got into the livery cab and did not look back as it left the kerb. He luxuriated over the bittersweet knot in his chest.

It was a shock how fluent, how effortless the passage through the airport seemed. His flight was full and after take off many passengers seemed to fall quickly asleep but he retrieved his book, also fetching a sweater for warmth. Kah had warned him about jet lag and he tried to read but the words on the page refused to come into focus; nothing to do with his eyes. He didn't feel in the least tired. Rather, his mind, so caught up recently in the here and now of mergers and advertising revenue pulled him away into memory and Wome welcomed the tug, which he'd not felt in months. He was going home to reconnect with family.

*A short time after Wome's birth, his mother prodded her husband to move to Douala, where he might take advantage of his teacher's certificate. Wome was christened in its lean, pockmarked Anglican church, but by the time he was five Bafut had become no more than a town at the end of a bone-jarring, eight-hour bus ride. Still, even as a boy, Bafut had a fame that, like a stingy man's paunch, preceded*

*it slightly. It was not until he was eight and read Gerald Durrell's Bafut Beagles did he understand the town's reputation a little better.*

*In Bafut or more properly, the village that was almost an extension of the town, Marguerite—Maman—was not her usual self. The city tautness of her posture sagged and, beset by in-laws, she became shrewish and petulant. In Douala she was practical and brisk. Wome was still young when he noticed how provincial life chafed at his mother.*

*In Bafut, Maman kept him always within reach with the words, "There are bad people in this village that will carry you away if you stray from me." Kab, by contrast, never stayed still more than moments, and her voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. Maman's attempts to enlist Kab in pounding yam drew blandly malicious cries to let her be from Pere's sisters.*

*Of course, Kab loved Bafut and not merely because of her aunts. Whole days passed in which she hurled her wiry body through the brake, dogs yipping in her trail as she chased grass-cutters. Boys in the village looked on Kab with awe. Wome never saw her lose her temper, but she would escalate the least challenge to a level of violence her coevals could never match. Kab's tomboyish ways, her prowess at stick fighting did not upset Maman, nor curiously, Kab's aunts, who might have seized this as one more reason for a grudge against their sister in law.*

*Marguerite was expected to show deference toward her "senior sisters" for having taken their brother off from the village. Instead, Maman was mutely defiant, withholding from them the due honorifics. She even balked at genuflecting to her mother-in-law ("On ne fait pas ça a Douala!"), which never failed to set her mouth twitching. Wome and Kab's grandmother seemed to them very ancient, although her frailty failed to earn Kab's respect. Chin wet with saliva, Grandmaman repeatedly stressed in a shuddering, sere voice her close kinship to the Fon of Bafut, whom at any moment might demand to Kab and Wome come to pay their respects.*

*Marguerite cared little for her nieces and nephews. She commented frequently on their uncoiled, scaly feet, which were adequate grounds, with uncombed hair, for her to dismiss them as unworthy playmates for her own children.*

*Later, when Kab and Wome were old enough to post disappointing school marks, Marguerite invoked Bafut as "that bush village" to which she'd exile them to clean latrines and thump yam until the end of their days. Pere was never permitted to overhear talk of this sort but even he did not display a strong attachment to Bafut.*

Snapping back into the present, Wome accepted a tray with meat, bread and lettuce. Outside the window lay an undifferentiated blackness. The snores of men and women were like catcalls. A few nightlights marked out scattered readers. He turned his face to the porthole once more and shivered, imagining the vast chill in space. Wome ate only half of the overcooked steak and then settled down beneath his blanket to watch a film. But his mind continued to run listlessly and without pattern through memories.

*Douala might well have been a different universe. Without the interference of Tanti Damaris and perhaps because Kab so shamelessly exploited it in Bafut, Maman brought her elder child to heel in Douala and instead Wome went free.*

*His sharpest recollections are of Douala in its ochre-dusted, Harmattan guise. Beneath whited skies cigarette-sucking moped riders made little effort to avoid obstacles in the road. Dogs with dugs like dewlaps alternately snapping and cringed. Douala was full of white Peugeot 504 taxis with broken axles and El Hajs in soiled bubus flashing gold teeth as they switched the chewing stick from one side of their mouth to the other. Tuareg mothers down from the North spat and thrust forward importuning infants. At any hour of the day men tarried in stalls and barber shops; there with things to discuss. Even laconic Franz could be seen sometimes down the street talking for an hour or so with a neighbour, saying more than he did to this children in a week.*

*From age five all Douala was Wome's to wander. Between bouts of fighting sticks and shooting at lizards, boys vied to assert their 'cityness.' A true city boy knew where to find the most succulent brochettes or to eke out the most sweets for his money, or even at which corners to watch as squatting Hausas projected through their front teeth improbably long streams of spittle that was reddish from kola nut.*

*Wome found sport in stealing past a dozy watchman into half constructed but prematurely decrepit houses in a quarter some distance from where he lived. Douala seemed to be formed of close-serried districts of inchoate houses, the never-to-ripen fruit of government bureaucrats' dreams of opulence. With their bare feet, Wome and his companions marred the still-soft concrete of what appeared to be a cramped kitchen, or pushed one another to no purpose through the naked window hatchings. Beyond the sensation that he was trespassing, Wome felt proprietary of these houses in which he ambushed other boys or scrabbled up crumbly walls. Years later, as he was readying to go to America, they still stood empty, overgrown and somehow momentous, a symbol perhaps of post-independence optimism dwindled to nothing.*

*One watchman, a cutlass-girt northerner, never failed to be gulled by the boys' tricks. He rained Foula invective on their boys' heads as they lurched in pretend fear from one house to the next, purposely never outdistancing the cumbersome guard by more than a few steps. If he succeeded through a convulsive effort in laying hands on one of them, they were collectively so full of begging guile, "Desolé, patron, Nous vous en prie," that he satisfied himself with a lone, light-handed blow before stalking back to his post. Afterward, they ate stringy, peppery brochette beside the road, waving flies off and mocking his fury amid wheezy laughter.*

*Wome's home was squat; a tiny bungalow in a middling neighbourhood saved from resemblance to a toad solely by its peaked roof. The concrete roof in fact swelled Marguerite's pride; neighbors with mere corrugated iron atop their houses never received more than a nod from her in greeting. Douala was not the village, after all, and neighbourly obligations easier discharged in the city.*

*But Pere did not own the house. He was a secondary school teacher of English and not so solvent as Maman wished. His salary although regularly paid was small. But it was the late-1970s and there were few signs of the cynicism and outrage that would come later.*

*Marguerite took charge of how the children would be raised. Pere and Wome gravely shook hands each night before the boy went to bed; otherwise they shared little physical contact. But Maman surely knew her son's body minutely. She bathed Wome and Kah until each was seven years old, and would have continued the practice if Kah did not put such a struggle as to nearly overturn the high-rimmed metal tub. Wome loved to be washed, but protested Maman lavng his backside immediately before she soaped his face. Still, pride demanded he follow Kah's lead and mutiny against this treatment as babyish when he turned eight.*

Kah had been altogether a blemish on his childish existence, Wome thought, as he dialled her number from a waiting lounge in Charles de Gaulle Airport. On the tarmac tractors and vans went along; the only clue that he was no longer in America came from French names and signs. It was eight o'clock and to change money and buy a phone card had been the work of three quarters of an hour. None of the pay telephones accepted coins.

"Eh, *mon frere*. *Tu es en France?*" Kah greeted him in an overdone Cameroonian inflection.

"*Ouuai*." Wome exaggerated his accent to match hers. "So are you coming to Douala?"

"Yes, but not until after Christmas. Are you excited?"

"Of course."

Kah said, "persuade them we don't need a trip to Bafut."

"You used to love Bafut." There was a reproach in his voice, which surprised Wome.

"Did I? When I was about seven, maybe."

"I always thought of Bafut as your place and Douala as mine. Maman couldn't control you in Bafut because Tanti Margo and Tanti Damaris questioned everything she said."

"Yes." Kah sounded speculative and unlike her usual self. "Maman never liked returning to Bafut. She still hates it there, I suppose. My tomboy days are far behind me."

Wome switched topics. "I might have to go to Lyon for work in the new year." He heard a beep and began to hunt on the phone for a number so Kah might call him back.

"Oh, so you'll stop in Paris?"

"No. You can come to Lyon. Or you don't want to go back there either."

"Not so. I love Lyon. It's a super city." He was curious about this word super, which Kah pronounced in an American way as if she'd learned it from television.

His mind darted back into the past as if the child Kah, with all her brutality, was more engaging than the adult. To steady himself, Wome asked, "Do you feel we're close, Kah?"

Her laughter bubbled up, deep and mannish. Kah had grown into it but in a skinny child it had sounded false. "Of course, *mon frere*. We talk every week." Then his card ran out and he'd not found a number. He put the phone down and spent a minute puzzling over why he'd given his sister barely any details about Sabine. Or why he knew so little about Kah.

He ate his sandwich, disliking the nervous waiting of airports and the compulsion to rush and to jostle even though one's seat had long since been paid for and assigned. The faces around him gave nothing away, not even idle boredom. Inscrutable businessmen, women, teens streamed past with nothing in their aspect or clothing to let on where they were going or why.



Wome boarded the second airplane exhausted from too much remembering and slept depthlessly for several hours. The jolt of touchdown woke him or perhaps the sound of applause, which Wome mistook at first for hard rain. He licked dryness from the corners of his mouth and opened his eyes. The window was misted from the temperature outside. The slowed and stopped. Possessions were gathered and children gently revived.

At last, the door fell open and Wome removed his sweater and allowed himself to be bustled forward by his fellow passengers. The air was dry and laden with the smell of jet fuel. On the tarmac, Wome retasted the dusty salt of Harmattan and smiled at thought of kissing the ground to celebrate the end of an exile. He felt keen and reluctant at the same time.

There was, in the stark, ill-kept arrivals hall, a line for foreigners and one for nationals, which though long steadily shortened. Wome's turn came. He braced for a raised eyebrow or a comment about his four year absence. But there was no reaction from the slim youthful official.

The interior looked the same, or at least as Wome expected it to; he had passed through it only once. Renovation was needed to conceal red marks that stained the floor and ceiling panels had begun here and there to come loose but the baggage carousel was functional albeit with overlapping plates that bucked up like hackles. But flight numbers had been scrawled on sheets and these tacked to pillars to indicate which carousel corresponded to which flight.

The customs officer ahead had the bored squint-eyed look of his kind, as though the lighting were too bright rather than too dim. He stood with one foot balance on the edge of his plastic chair and his pistol in an ancient looking leather holster lay twisted on the top of his thigh. But he was alert. It was Christmas and the bags and boxes being ferried past were full of expensive goods. He took a keen interest in the man who preceded Wome and delayed him for several minutes although in the end he did not open of any of his bag or

boxes. As if needing oil the opaque-glassed sliding doors opened and each time Wome heard the mutter of an expectant crowd. The barrier behind which people waited was set back far enough that individual features remained indistinct.

And then Wome was clear of customs and in the great high-ceilinged hall, he resisted the urge to cast about in search of his father's face or his mother's. He proceeded at an unhurried pace with his trolley. Each face seemed to mirror the apprehension of its neighbour, as though it were far from assured whether the uncle or wife to be met had in fact found a seat on the flight. A light-skinned woman with the four teetering boxes on her trolley was trying to pass through in front of Wome but there seemed little inclination to yield.

Wome saw his father and smiled but Franz seemed not to have spotted him. He was dwarfed by the men flanking him. Wome wanted to wave but in moments he stood in front of Franz and now he grinned, looking cheeky, even puckish behind his glasses. Wome hesitated before the two of them embraced. The smallness of his father, the feel of his shoulderblades through the thin fabric of his shirt was a shock. There was perhaps a little gray in Franz's hair at the crown, a rheum in the whites of his eyes. Otherwise he appeared no older, only very much tinier. "Welcome back, Wome." Even Franz's voice itself had not changed but the tone was new, diffident. Wome saw little of himself in this man's familiar and yet alien features.

Pere put a hand to Wome's back to direct him outside but first Wome needed to exchange some money. A row of empty taxis was drawn up beside the kerb and beside the foremost one, where the pavement rucked up like ill-formed teeth, a seethe of flitting insects—moths, flying ants—thronged a streetlamp. Two drivers, the shorter one natty in a shiny suit performed a little dance to a Petit Pays tune coming over a crackly car radio. Both had fixed cigarettes between pursed lips and an inch or so of ash clung to each. The

sensation of hot, almost greasy air on Wome's cheeks and forehead confirmed he was home. He was in Douala.

The lanky driver waited until Wome and Pere settled in the back seat before he swiveled to take a good look at Wome, perhaps to size up his passengers' taste in music. Then he slid a cassette into the deck. Pere was saying, "Things have changed since you went away. In some ways better, in others not so well." But he went on to talk not about politics, because of the driver, but about matters at school, *Lycée Descartes* where he taught English. Wome allowed Franz's voice to cover him, distally grateful to do nothing more than listen. He remained too giddy to do much more than take in smells and sights he'd forgotten he knew. The tape in the cassette had stretched with too much use or from being left in the sun and Sam Fan Thomas played now too fast, now too slowly.

He peered through the occlusion of his dimming dreams to find reality but he recognized little. The dark was a warm, unshifting mask and the wind rushing through the open window was laden now with the gagging stink of seared rubber, now with the acridness of woodsmoke. The streetlights dispersed in a tight radius tired, feverish illumination and Wome reminded himself he must not allow four years in America to obscure his perceptions.

There were few cars on either side of the two lane road but on the dusty walkway there was, as he and Franz came into town, a fierce traffic. Now Wome scented roast corn and the sour smell of grilled offal. Vendors tended their offerings and a boy was herding his bicycle rim with a stick along the dusty median. Life being lived, buying and selling, fleeting visions backlit by an amorphous glow of a settlement set back from the road. Now and then the dull light was shut out by a Decrepit MAN truck parked roadside for the night. Wome knew without being able to see that bricks had been lodged behind the tyres as a precaution while the drivers slept.

The taxi slowed as they came into town and Wome heard nighttime sounds over the gush of air. The whine and cough of mopeds. A few streets had been decorated with forlorn Christmas lights but the atmosphere did not seem particularly festive. Impassive, Franz pointed to a glass-fronted office tower. "That building there was completed only this year. But it has not yet opened and no one knows anything about it."

Wome did not recognize his own precinct, even his parents' house until Franz informed the driver to stop. Maman had been waiting inside the door and she now ran into the street. After Franz's calm, her exuberance took Wome by surprise as he got out of the taxi. Maman had shrunk less startlingly than Franz but perhaps because Wome had already outgrown her before he left Cameroon. But she was graying more than her husband although her face was still smooth. The ferocity of her hug moved him, and she stepped back to take him in before enfolding him again. They are not yet fifty, he reminded himself. Guilt or shame made joy precarious.

Under his mother's direction, the taxi driver dragged the luggage up to the step. Inside, in the tiny kitchen, Maman turned this way and that as if unsure what to do first. Wome carried his things indoors. Everything seemed too be miniature. The table at which he'd eaten his meals came a little past his knee and the beds in the room he would share once more with Kah were children's beds. He set down his suitcase and for a moment stood looking about, afraid to stir from where he stood and risk knocking into something.

He switched off the naked bulb and, feeling giantish, went to the kitchen and sat across from his father, propping his elbows on the plastic-covered table. Franz's face was faintly apologetic.

Maman's cooking had not changed, for which Wome was grateful. His appetite was small but he ate the stewed greens and beef with rice set before him. Pere asked a most unFranz-like question, "What are your friends in New York doing for the holidays?" And

then Maman wondered whether winter had set in properly, which she'd never done over the telephone. The two of them seemed eager to talk about his life in general and they watched their son as if he were flimsy and needed protection. His mother relaxed enough to leave the dishes on the table and the three of them talked until Wome quite suddenly yawned, which acted as a signal on his parents. Maman got up and began to tidy things away. To that moment, Wome had realized how quiet it was. There had been no other sound but their voices and the occasional sputter from the streets of an engine misfiring. "It's good to have you with us." Franz put a hand on Wome's shoulder and then he stood up to hug his mother.

Then he was alone and now unfamiliar flapping noises did blow in from outside. The padlock and chain on the door seemed small protection but he took one last look around the small house, stepping carefully to avoid knocking anything. His mother had hung on the walls, reproductions of obscure European paintings.

With a light-limbed kind of fatigue, he went into his room. which was exactly as he remembered it, almost a shrine. Kah's room was even smaller than his own. The iron bedsteads stood in tomato paste tins from which the water had leached away. One of Kah's old dolls sat propped on a pillow, a blue-eyed thing with brush lashes and a short almost kittenish dress.

In the bathroom they all shared, Wome killed a scuttling cockroach with his shoe, then, pouring water from the jug he brushed his teeth. The iron tub still stood in its place and looking at it, Wome smiled. The house was simple but no hardship.

Wome settled onto the hard mattress, which seemed to retain the imprint of his childish form, and tried to lie still. Insomnia came from his body's insistence on responding to the rhythms of a city many hours away. He wanted to get up to telephone Sabine and tell her not to worry but did not want for fear of waking his parents.

A cock crooned not far away and at some early hour and he turned over and back into dreamless sleep but he woke to the cough of Franz's *mobylette* being kicked to life. Wome sat up and took stock. Barefoot he went out of the tiny room a bit later and found his mother in the kitchen.

The morning baguette had not yet turned spongy, nor was it wholly crisp. Wome ate it with milky black tea and too-bright jam. Franz had gone to school for the last day of term and *Maman* got quickly down to practicalities. "I told your sister she'll never find a husband if she works so hard."

"Kah will get married when she's ready, Maman." It seemed pointless to protest Kah did not tell him any more than she did anyone else in the family.

As he swallowed the last of his breakfast, Maman asked. "Wome, do you have a girlfriend?" the question was too direct for a lie although she did not look at him.

"Yes." What would Sabine be doing at this moment. Getting ready, he imagined, to go home to Montreal. He waited for Maman to go on.

"And do you love her?"

"Yes." His mother gave him the steely eye he remembered from boyhood. He hoped his answers might suffice to end *Maman's* plans for him.

"Then marry her. Don't waste time, Wome. Young women nowadays are impatient. Look at your sister. She has a good job and now no one is good enough for her. Maybe we too aren't good enough for her anymore." He avoided his mother's eye and said nothing. A few moments passed and she got up and switched the channel on the radio. Wome helped clear the table then he said, "I want to go out and walk a bit, Maman." She gave him a knowing look as if she'd guessed his intentions.

Feeling a little ridiculous, he clambered into the iron tub and squatted to sponge himself clean with a hand towel. In the midmorning heat, he welcomed the cool trickle of jug water over his body.

As if he were going to the office, he kissed his mother and crossed her threshold. Some leave-takings are, he acknowledged, utterly inconsequential. In a few days time, he would walk out of the house again without knowing when he might return.

The day had gained in humidity but Wome was most keenly aware of how little noise there was and how few people there were in the vicinity. He walked at the edge of the broken road, the air smelled sweet, creamy scent like ripening guavas. At the first T junction he made an instinctive left toward his primary school, as it were but then chose the next right.

In *Quartier Deido*, well-trodden murrain sidewalks flanked the road and down these came an unsteady procession of cyclists. Wome was overtaken by a woman with a load on her head and a baby cinched to her back, chewing vacantly on her cleaning stick. Her swishing steps left Wome quickly fell behind. At each intersection open sewers gaped to reveal plastic bottles and empty gold-leaf cigarette cartons, which glinted from the mire like items of value. Douala! Wome, sweating now, looked for human land marks from his childhood. The meat sellers were in their accustomed place tending spits. *Suya*, he thought, but that was the Nigerian counterpart to what was properly *brochette*. Mingled with the fug of human waste in the drains was the offal smell of sizzling liver. Unaccosted, Wome walked on, his jeans clinging about his thighs. He went with no certain destination but at every step the conviction mounted he was on unfamiliar terrain. In the streets, there were no gamins with sling shots to remind him of himself. Instead he looked with pity at underage vendors of nuts or matches, bedraggled boys dusted in long accumulated grime stoic beneath the

heat. Wome bought a small plastic sack of peanuts from one old-eyed boy and his palm became slippery with sweat from clutching it.

This sandy city in which he'd fetched up, with its air of being neither leisurely nor frantic was a counterfeit Douala and did not feel like home. Much of the terrain was recognisable even if the faces had altered. His compatriots had become tight-featured and inscrutable.

Footsore, his steps carried him home. His father's old mobylette was not in its accustomed place and the door yielded to Wome's hand without a key. Maman's head was inclined against the chair back and from her throat came little murmuring sighs reminiscent somehow of love making. Even the radio announcer's voice seemed slurry with indolence, which was at odds with the urgency of his words: "Listeners, we want to hear what you think about gender roles?" Fretting a little about the unlocked front door, Wome turned down the radio and left his mother to doze. Inside his own room, he fell fully clothed onto the brutal mattress and fell headlong into jetlagged sleep despite the buzzing of a fly.

At a pay telephone on the outskirts of the market Wome slid his finger into the rotary dial, which clacked as it was turned. A hawker with yoyos and alarm clocks loitered nearby then Wome heard a sleepy man's voice came on the line; it would be early morning where he was. Wome started at the lucidity of the connection, and even more at the sound of a male voice but he asked for Sabine, and by way of apology, explained he was calling from another time zone. There was a bump as of plastic against flesh, the murmuring of French words and a woman now crooned something Wome failed to make out. A man with sinewy forearms held out a pair of bulbous black and gold watches for Wome's perusal. Wome ignored him for a few moments and then shook his head. He stared into insolent eyes, willing the man to go away. A fly settled on his cheek and he allowed it to play across



his top lip for many moments. Wome shuddered and shook his head, partly with impatience.

Sabine said, "*Allo, Wome?*" and the other extension in the house clicked off.

"*Cherie, comment tu vas?*" He hated the breathlessness of his voice.

"Everything is good. It's quiet, relaxing. The serious eating hasn't yet begun, Thank God, and no four hour masses yet. Tomorrow, my uncles, aunts and cousins arrive so we're baking all day today. And you? Your parents? Is Kah there?"

"Not yet. The day after Christmas. *Maman* and *Pere* are well. What will you do on New Year's?" The watch salesman had been replaced by an unblinking sock vendor.

"I might go out with some friends if I can duck midnight mass." Sabine's voice became wary as if someone else had come into the room.

"I miss you," he said softly, glaring at the vendor who stood a metre away and who stared back, not even bothering to hold up his wares.

"I told my mother about you. Us."

Wome waited to see if she would go on. Then he asked, "What did you tell her?"

"That it's serious and I love you despite you being the only African man who can't dance zouk."

He laughed, grateful that Sabine lightened what might become a sentimental exchange of endearments. "My mother urged me to marry you without delay. Is it too late for you to come out here?"

"*Toi aussi.* Such a mummy's boy." Wome wanted to protest but his money had run out. A mechanic squawk assailed his ear and then there was silence. The conversation left him with a feeling of satisfaction but he briefly considered going for more coins.

He moved off into the market and four gaunt, gangling adolescents converged on him. Streetboys. The most aggressive one, broad shouldered but hollowed out with hunger, had already a man's appearance. Each spoke only for himself. "*J'ai pas manger.*" They

stroked their bellies or pointed clustered fingertips at their lips, sullenly imploring. The smallest boy's lips shone with snot as he heeled Wome. In his hand was a bottle of glue and he said over and over simply, "Patron." At every step the plastic bags bound at his ankles rustled. Wome took the money he would have changed for the phone and gave it to a seller of brochettes. "I want eight," he said.

She took the money and held up five fingers. "They have not yet finished." The streetboys had followed him and Wome now pointed at them. The woman made a face as if she considered this a waste of food but Wome begun to walk away. The homeless boys did not even glance at him.

Wome had sat to drink a coffee at a slightly garish *Salon de thé* in the nicest section of *Bonajo* when he thought he recognized a face hurrying past. He called out but the man's steps had taken him already out of earshot. For a moment, Wome thought he was mistaken but he said the name again, shouting so that two women at a table nearby stared. "Yves." The man spun and Wome saw that yes, it was him. He came tentatively closer, peering into the shade as if unwilling to stop without good cause. "Yves, *c'est* Wome." Wome dropped his voice, aware now of drawing attention. Yves appeared to make up his mind and ducked a little as he stepped under the café's awning. Don't you remember me, the words rose to Wome's lips but instead he put out his hand. His childhood classmate was skinny now, sparer even than Wome whereas he'd been stocky and thick-wristed as a boy. His suit hung from his shoulders and the cuffs bagged about his wrists.

Pumping Wome's hand, Yves seemed wondering rather than glad. "Wome, what are you doing here?"

Wome gestured at an empty chair. "Join me."

"I was going back to the office." Yves spoke in English. Wome remembered that the two of them had competed in that subject for the top marks in class. Even after Wome

went to Lagos Yves always insisted on challenging him. "My uncle helped me get this job. I'm trying to get another one, but..." He gestured out into the hazy noontime street. Just then a waitress came and Yves asked for a *pain au chocolat* and coffee. "Things here are very bad." Wome conceded Yves' heavily accented English was no worse than that of many Americans. Listlessly, he told Wome, "I want to go to Germany or Israel. France or Belgium are now too difficult." He twitched and fidgeted as if his clothes itched, and he did not modulate his voice when he said, "Biya is killing this country," Wome shifted on his chair to catch sight of how those about them might react. Yves had not yet put any questions to Wome and he felt like an onlooker at a recital. "I'd prefer Israel because Jewish people are clever with technology and this is the best place to study engineering." He ate his pastry and scraped up the crumbs with his fingers then he said, "So are you moving back to Douala?"

Wome hid a smile. "You just told me there are no jobs here?"

"But there are opportunities for business. You've got money. And a degree from a U.S university. With the right sort of business, you could do well." He'd begun to speak French. "What did you study?"

"Yves, I know nothing about business." Part of Wome wanted to admit he probably would never again live in Cameroon. Tactlessly, he said, "Don't you have to get back to work?" There was about Yves a febrile desperation, not precisely like the ravening street boys but perhaps no less a torment. Wome wanted to get away from him.

Yves looked at his watch. He was sweating as if eating taxed him. "But how often do I see you, my childhood friend?"

Wome smiled blindly at him. He settled the bill and said, "Come. I'll walk you back to your office, Yves."

Heat hammered out of the dirty-white sky like an erratic pulse and Doualans with no reason to be out of doors had fled. A woman steadied a basket of oranges at her knees, sagging in defeat. Wome's heart was beating too quickly from the strong coffee but he took New York strides, forcing Yves to keep up. Yves came to a halt in front of the glass doors of a short, cream-colored office block. "When are you going back to New York? I'll come and visit you when I finish my studies."

Wome promised to look him up before he left town but Yves' agitated, incurious chatter had been more disturbing than any wheedling or bluster. Neither of them spoke as they shook hands farewell but the veneer of amity had fallen and Wome hoped his face did not mirror the scorn in Yves' eyes.

At home, his mother put down the newspaper and cornered him. "Tell me about this woman, your girlfriend. Can she live in Douala, do you think?"

Wome laughed and pinched his temples. Franz was snoring in his parents' bedroom. "I don't know."

"The way things are in the country, we need our sons and daughters to come back."

"But what would I do here, Maman?"

"It would be good to have you home. You've been away so long."

"I'm not sure this is home anymore. You and Pere are my only tie to Douala."

Wome shrugged. "To Cameroon."

"Do you love America so much already?" His mother was perplexed.

Wome said, "What does Kah say when you ask her about coming back?"

She lowered her eyes in a gesture of sheepishness. "I haven't asked Kah. You know how your sister is. She's always done as she wants. I know she will never come back to Cameroon."

"But you think I'd be happier here than in New York?" But she did not answer

Out of a quiet guilt Wome went to midnight mass with his mother, relieving Pere of the obligation. A taxi took them through forlorn streets in which there were many well-dressed worshipers on their way to church. To Wome it looked like a citywide funeral procession. Neutrally, Maman said: "Your father's faith is not what it was." Wome felt overdressed in his slim suit, and dismissed the thought. There would be men in waistcoats at the mass.

The cathedral stood on an island of grass, not quite massive—but it was the oldest cathedral in Douala—with a well tended exterior embellished by darkness. Inside it was full of standing, silent people, and smelled not unpleasantly of settled dust and dissipating heat. Only the muttering, swaying choir seemed restive, as if impatient to begin. Maman chose a place for them which offered no vantage. Wome could see lectern but his mother's view was obscured by the people in front of them.

The church hall was too warm from the massing of bodies and it became hotter still as Wome waited with his mother. Ceiling fans twirled lazily on their short stems. Wome shifted from foot to foot, checking his watch every few minutes but Maman bore up well as if she endured hard stone beneath the soles of her feet each day. Minutes before midnight, the bishop entered trailed by a deacon and three altar servers. Two of these carried short chains with thuribles; the third bore aloft a massive cross of dull, twisted metal. The bishop proceeded with the dragging steps of an aged man but this might have been to avoid the indignity of tripping on his robes. It was difficult to say how old he was for the skin of his forehead was smooth and fine but his eyes were swaddled in small wrinkles. The deacon seemed about half his age and perhaps a few years older than the servers. Perhaps out of reverence few in the congregation turned to watch the bishop's advance as the gathering song was sung. He came to a halt before the altar and bowed with a surprising suppleness.

Wome smelled the cloying sweetness of the incense as the servers made two passes about him swinging their chains. The bishop waited moments for the last note of chanting to die in the air then offered the Greeting in a croaky yet strong voice. From his accent Wome knew him for an Anglophone, probably from Bamenda.

No aspect of the Shepherd's mass was omitted. Throughout, the bishop and his attendants maintained expressions of flat serenity. Wome watched their faces for a shift in mood, some sign of amusement or tenderness but there were none. His own involvement was intermittent; But he was unable to resist joining in from the third line of *Gloria in Excelsis*, Lord, King, Heavenly God. The singing was so achingly pure. Tears came in his eyes; he'd forgotten how beautifully his mother sang. Maman looked up at him before she ducked her head to pray with amusement in her eyes.

By two a.m., they were walking home. Except for the ghostly sauntering churchgoers that surrounded them, there was little to indicate it was Christmastime. The temperature had fallen and a faint Harmattan wind could be felt coursing toward the sea. Wome put an arm about his mother to steady her and to impart some warmth to her thin bones.

At home Maman made tea; neither of them seemed in any hurry to go to sleep. Softly, Wome said, "there were not many young people at mass."

"They are turning now to Protestant churches." She sniffed. "The priests there say its good to be rich." Her words rang true and Wome nodded. They drank their tea, both perhaps remembering the best parts of Mass. Wome wanted to broach the matter of a house for her and Pere but kept silent. Companionable silence wrapped the two of them and resolved to wait for Kah's arrival before raising what would be a touchy issue. There was a dull tension in his limbs that had nothing to do with fatigue.

London's weather was warmer, clammier than New York. Two hours after he landed at Heathrow, Shokare called his mother from Paddington station. The phone pealed its slow drawling ring for a whole minute without being answered. On an impulse, Shokare bought a seat on a commuter train to Middlesex on the reasoning he could take shelter in a café until he made contact with his mother. Without haste, he towed his cases toward the train platform. The rush hour was coming to an end and commuters streamed past, the faces more uniform than those across the Atlantic. The abundance of narrow beaky noses and long saturnine faces offered Shokare evidence of island homogeneity.

Ordinarily the yaw and clack of trains made him drowsy but his senses were tautened by the mingled feeling of familiarity and strangeness. He did not know what to expect in Staines. His mother had moved to Middlesex after he left England for New York.

It seemed more straightforward to get straight into a taxi than to fumble with a pay telephone in the station and so Shokare did so. Staines appeared toylike in its orderliness with its pale-barked pavement trees, post office and straitened high street. He did not recognize the names of any of the stores he went past and the town seemed quaint, altogether more unhurried than any he might find in suburban America. The Christmas decorations had been taken down immediately and he wondered if this was out of respect for secular sensibilities. The cabdriver easily found his mother's apartment. The small building contained maybe six flats behind a façade of chalky gray stone perhaps ten minutes walk from the train station, although Shokare did not know if he could find his way back.

The buzzer gave a reassuring whine when he pressed it. After a minute a worried-faced Ayiide opened the door. "Shokare, I forgot completely when you were arriving." She unlocked the metal grille gate and hugged him in the threshold. His mother had grown thinner and paler; the shapeless dark wool of her sweater, and her thick grey exercise pants could not conceal her spareness.

"Mum, are you taking care of yourself?" Ayiide's flat was disheveled, a chain of small rooms none of which had not been tidied in some days. The atmosphere was dim and close without being cozy. He slipped so easily into a fond chiding mode of speech with his mother. And he hated the involuntary 'Mum' but it was better than Mummy.

Ayiide showed him to a tiny second room in the back, little more than a garret. "Let me make some tea." Shokare shivered, looking at the single bed. There was a tickle in his throat like the beginnings of a cough. He tamped down distaste and the question, 'why did I come?' In the kitchen, he blurted, "Is Dad not sending you any money?"

"Why is that virtually the first thing you ask me, always? You know I don't want anything from your father." For a time Ayiide called Tale 'that man.' Now Shokare guessed she no longer harbored any bitterness. The kitchen was small, designed for a sole occupant at a time; merely by turning this way or that to fetch a mug or to take out a tea bag, Ayiide appeared to bustle about.

Feeling ignored, Shokare asked "how's work?"

"It's fine. Busy and chaotic as usual." She looked up at him, her eyes bright and nervous. "Tell me about work for you, your life. You're always so terse."

"Same. I'm still a peon. Creativity has never been so dull, I feel."

She looked at him again, musing. "I always saw you becoming a writer. Or...a filmmaker. You have lots of creative energy."

Shokare shrugged. "I *have* been doing lots of writing lately. I've become quite philosophical since I was dumped." He wanted to discuss Magda but his mother showed no curiosity. She handed him a brimming mug of tea with the tea bag still inside. "How's *your* love life, Mama?"

"At my age what kind of love life I go have?" She sounded once more like a Lagosian.



He went to sit at the cluttered table, nudging aside a manuscript. With a straight face, he said, "You're not even fifty, mum. Perhaps you should show daddy by finding someone my age." Ayiide set down a tea tray with biscuits and smiled at him in such a way he knew she'd not really listened. "What are you thinking about now? You're always so distracted." He hated the neediness his mother's presence aroused in him and the way his speech changed.

Her face went still a moment and thoughtful before she sat back, cupping the mug with both palms. "What would I do with someone your age? A boy of 22 wants a woman with boobs."

Unthinking, he replied, "Boobs? You have boobs." Then he sifted through questions before asking, "Did they catch it early enough?"

Ayiide looked at Shokare pityingly, as though he were ill. "They're not sure yet. Perhaps it hasn't metastasized yet but we're doing tests."

"Does your insurance cover everything?" Since age fourteen when his parents divorced, he'd felt responsible for his mother.

"Yes, mostly. It'll depend on if I need a mastectomy." She lapped tea like a child.

"Did you ask Daddy for help?"

"I told you I don't want anything from him, Shokare." The earnestness of his mother's face with its upturned nose and narrowed mouth made her seem still more girlish.

"What's for dinner? Shokare knew Ayiide would talk when she was ready. She made a guilty face "Let me guess. You were hoping I'd cook."

"Or we could go out." His mother checked her watch. "I'll treat you; there's a little Italian restaurant not far."

"Will it be open?" Shokare got up and went to look in the fridge. Dried out slices of brown bread in plastic. A bundle of carrots. A can of peas." He kissed his teeth and shook his head.

Shokare let out his resentment in a spurt in the restaurant. It was a squalid belowstairs little place with greasy table cloths. The heat had been set on low. "Why do you never ask me about relationships or my emotional state? I mentioned I'd been dumped earlier and you didn't show any interest."

A waiter with a Greek accent came and asked what they would have.

Ayiide nibbled at stale bread, dwarfed by her hooded coat, which she refused to remove. Shokare considered putting his duffel coat back on, pouting slightly. Ayiide had always been able to shut him out when he whined or demanded too much and he wondered not for the first time why he'd reflexively taken her part when she fought with Tale. The two of them, mother and son, shared a detached idealism that exasperated Tale and which allowed Shokare to quickly forget Ayiide's quirks, her irritating moments of blankness. Its easiest, he thought, to love people we don't live with.

She refused now to be pushed. When she spoke it was with an air of having deliberated over an idea. "So tell me about this heartbreaking woman?"

It was a man, Shokare almost said, but his mother would not be shocked, a consequence perhaps of being married to his father for more than a decade. And she had cancer, he thought, possibly terminal and thus deserved to be spared his petulance. They saw little enough of one another. The waiter brought a carafe of red wine to the table. "She's Angolan. A minx. It served me right falling for someone like that."

"A minx?" Ayiide sounded impressed. "How?"

Shokare shrugged his arms through his coat sleeves. "Very attractive. Devious and smart. Anyway, we should talk about your...illness. If I asked Dad to send you money he

would. That way you wouldn't have to wait for National Health if you need surgery." In fact it was far from certain Tale would do anything for him. Shokare took a swallow of sickly sweet red wine.

"Hmm, I can imagine what he'd say. Why I am sending money to England? It should be the other way round. *Abi*, your mother went to England to further her bloody career?"

Shokare laughed uneasily. Ayiide mimicked Tale well, too well, dredging up buried memories.

The food was hot and too heavily spiced with garlic but they were hungry. He finished the pasta on his plate and felt ready for sleep. His mother ate slowly, carefully but she too cleared her plate of food although much of the red wine remained undrunk.

Ayiide hadn't brought a purse and fished a credit card from her pocket to pay. As they walked home, Shokare fell a little behind. Ayiide had fallen silent and it was unwise to push her over her allotment of words. The quiet of the tiny lanes, which held both detached and semi-detached houses was watchful and ominous, in no way resembling the genteel stillness of the countryside as he imagined it. Pray you never fetch up in the suburbs, Shokare told himself.

"Why don't you go to bed. You must be tired," Ayiide said. She sat down to continue editing a manuscript. Tonight they would not sit up into the small hours and chew, laughing and perhaps a little tearful, over the past.

He washed with quick carelessness and got into the single bed with socks on his feet. He waited for the warmth of his skin to flood the cool, crisp sheets. He was too tired to read. Even in this tiny room at the back of the flat, he could sense a peculiar noiselessness like waiting rising from the streets. The pipes clanked and Shokare hovered his hand over the radiator, which emanated only a faint heat. The occasional late car or motorcycle

splashed past and he imagined some restless soul on the way to a pub, or perhaps going as far as the city.

Shokare slept, dreaming of Nigeria. Ayiide and Tale were married still, but there was another junior wife living in the house too. His brothers and sisters were of similar age with himself but somehow apart.

Wome and Marguerite went to the airport together after Christmas to meet the Air France flight from Paris.

The flight had been full, its passengers even more laden than those who had arrived in time for Christmas. Kah came into focus, dressed in black, in the midst of a procession with which she had no connection. She was concentrating on steering her trolley without bumping anyone and Wome waved for a moment or two before he was noticed. Kah hugged Marguerite and then turned toward Wome, who stooped slightly. She looked him up and down as her arms went wide as though she had not seen him in years rather than months. "*Mon frère.*" He himself was more alert than he'd been in Rhode Island. Then, he'd been too nervous and distracted by the prospect of graduation to pay close attention to his sister.. His sister was no longer wiry; she had grown into those hammer hands which had so terrified him as a boy.

He released her and took hold of the trolley. "You travel light, Kah."

She smiled and slid an arm about her mother's shoulders. "Where's Papa?"

Maman said, "At home. He's waiting for you."

Wome couldn't resist the urge to be impish "He's getting ready for the trip to Bafut. We leave tomorrow."

Kah turned frowning to look at Maman, who giggled. Kah relaxed, laughing a little also. Wome kept a straight face

The house became cramped with four bodies. A skilled choreography was necessary, which only Kah seemed to possess. She navigated the rooms with a spatial nonchalance that Wome attributed to athleticism. Unless they were sleeping, Wome and Kah never occupied the bedroom at the same time.

Most afternoons, Wome went into town to have a coffee but Kah preferred to while away hours at the table with her glossy magazines as Franz napped or worked. Opposite, her mother sat brushing off flies and trying to read her newspaper. No one protested that the radio now played American pop through the day.

The day before New Year's Eve, Wome was making his way out when Kah asked, "Did you find out what's happening on New Year's Eve?"

"No. not really. Probably something at one of the hotels." At the threshold he said, "Don't you want to come to town and have a coffee?" He wanted to discuss buying a house for their parents. Curious, Marguerite looked up as Kah went on flipping pages.

He was pleased and surprised when she consented. "All right. Give me a minute." She went and put on her tennis shoes, which amused him.

Wome had walked the route enough times that the man who sold cigarettes at the first crossroads greeted him. Kah waved but did not break stride. If not curious about her surroundings, she at least seemed to enjoy the weight of sun on her face. 'See,' he thought, 'you don't have to hide in the house.' But he wanted her support so he said, "I want us to help Maman and Pere in some way. Not just sending them money each month. I've been thinking we should buy or build them a property." Alongside, a taxi van now proceeded at a crawl, the driver tooted little bleats on his horn to inquire if they wanted a ride. They ignored him.

"It's a good idea If you can get them to agree." Kah thought about it. For once I think Marguerite may be easier, more receptive. If you try to lay it out for Pere as a fait accompli, he'll be stubborn."

"If I try? Why not we?"

Of course, I'll put money but I think it's better for you to take the lead. Face it, you're the darling at the moment."

He looked back at her, "Why's that?" But he knew there would be no answer.

The Salon de Thé was fuller than usual. Wome saw many sleekly dressed men and women who were obviously visiting from abroad. He sat with his back facing outward; since meeting Yves, he'd decided to avoid chance encounters.

He and Kah ordered coffees and then he said, "So, what's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged, knowing circumspection was unlikely to prise any information from his sister. "Generally. Work, life?"

Kah sat back and as if Wome had not spoken, mused, "You know, when you first mentioned buying a plot, I thought, 'hmmm.' But I think Marguerite will like the idea of overseeing the design of her own house."

"Yes. I'll look into how much these things cost. How you *can* help me though," he eyed her significantly, "is by helping me to decide where the new house should be. We need to think long-term."

The waitress brought their cups and, as she was leaving, Kah said. "Excuse me, can you tell us the name of a club to go to tomorrow night?"

The waitress's smoothed down her apron. As if she were addressing her seniors and not people of her own age, she said, "What are you interested in?"

Kah said she did not want anything too fancy. "But we don't want to go to Ibis or Sheraton."

"You can go to Broadway. In Akwa." She did not seem very certain but Kah seemed satisfied with this response.

Wome agreed to go to the nightclub then regretted it. Maman would expect him to chaperone his sister. He got ready early and sat at the table. Over the radio, President Biya was making his New Year's Speech. "1996 will be another superlative year for our country." Franz snorted. In front of him was a glass of whiskey, a rare indulgence. "We are working to create jobs in all regions of the country." Biya spoke in a bored, intoning way as but Wome did not doubt the speech would last the better part of an hour.

Kah came out, girlish in a silver satiny knee-length dress. Wome's surprise showed on his face for she twirled and said, "What? I never get to dress like this in Paris."

They kissed their parents and wished them, "*Bonne Annee*" before getting into the taxi Wome had arranged.

They saw no one at the entrance to Broadway. The club was on a deserted strip in an unfamiliar part of Akwa. Wome told Kah to wait in the taxi and he got out. There was a woman in the concession stand, her eyes vividly applied with too much blue eye make up. She laughed when Wome asked her if the club was closed. "Don't worry; they are coming. Some people are still in church. He went and told Kah and they both went inside. "Come back for us at four," Kah paid for the two of them, the equivalent, Wome calculated, of sixty dollars.

The interior was reminiscent of the club he had gone to in Washington with Ndlovu and Sabine. The coloured lights spun and winked but there were no more than ten people inside. Two of these women were almost certainly prostitutes. Their eyes were hard and

they seemed indifferent to the R&B music the DJ was playing. The men wore suits and garish paisley ties. Wome had guessed correctly that he would be more casual than most in his short sleeved shirt.

At 1:30. Broadway had filled and Wome was drunk and in a vicious mood. A short, wide-hipped man in a bow tie approached Kah to dance to zouk and Wome spent two hours by himself. He felt in no mood to dance and by 2:30 the vodka tonics he was drinking had ceased to have any other effect than to make him more bitter. The dancing was subdued, not so lusty as it had been the night in Washington.

As they rode home in the taxi, Kah said, "That man's thing. I could feel it mashing into my thigh." Wome said nothing; he was preoccupied with thoughts about what 1996 might bring.

By mid-afternoon of the second day Shokare realized he'd seen all of Staines. The high street stores shut early on account of the season. All that remained open were a little shopfront butcher's, a card and gift shop with a sign in the window that said: Will be back soon. A sallow, indistinct sun peered out from time to time and every so often planes flew overhead that he could hear but not see. One of the two local pubs billed itself a gastropub but neither were inviting so Shokare went and waited in the station until a train came. Stirring in his loins, he felt a predatory sensation that not be appeased in the suburbs.

In London, everybody appeared to have the day off. Everywhere he looked there were couples and not just young professionals out window shopping, arm in arm. Interracial couples pushing strollers with wild-haired children; they looked like children themselves. Even the middle aged seemed to be in a state of comfortable cohabitation. Shokare thought of Tara although he'd played at boyfriend and girlfriend not with her but with Magda. He



fished a number from his wallet and went into a phone booth. Buzzily, the line rang several times and then switched to an answering machine. Shokare hung up.

The ubiquity of romance on the streets drove him into a bookstore in Oxford circus. But he perused the shelves with little will. He always gave Ayide books for presents and wanted to give her something more thoughtful. Now. When he thought of his mother he imagined malignancy spreading like a slow spill of black ink through her chest and resolved to be patient with her, and supportive.

Eventually, he purchased a Georges Perec novel without knowing who it was for. He tried another telephone number and got an immediate answer "Kayo."

"Na me o. who *dis*?"

"Shokare. How now?"

"Body *dey*. Oga, you *dey* for *dis* side?"

"I *don* reach. I *dey* with my mama for Middlesex. It's too quiet. Make *unna* meet me for one nice bar."

"No *wahala*. Give me a couple hours. *Shebi* you know Baraza?"

"Brixton, *abn*? See you there."

## January

Wome woke on his last full day in Douala with a parched throat and the thought that he must speak today to his parents about the new house. Franz had gone out on his *mobylette* and Kah still slept. He refused tea and instead filled a tall plastic glass of boiled water that had been cooled. He felt in no mood to eat baguette. He swallowed to rid his mouth of excess saliva and said to his mother, "Kah and I were talking about building a house for you."

Perhaps Marguerite had lost the capacity for surprise. Although she raised her eyes her voice held no surprise. "Your father and I like this house." Wome could smell the thin milkiness of her tea. For the first time since his arrival he did not feel outsize with his knees underneath the table. We can get used to anything, he thought. "And we do not get many visitors."

He smiled at his mother's slyness. His temples throbbed but he was determined to remain calm. "Of course, Maman, but you'd have more security in your own house. Especially as salaries aren't always paid on time. Kah and I don't want you and Pere thrown onto the street."

Maman drank from her cup. "Kah agrees with all this? You and she came up with this plan together?"

He sighed and then chose candour. "Actually, she's willing to support whatever I propose. But we both want to do something. Was there's something else you'd rather...."

"I planned to travel next year. First to visit Kah, and then you in New York, but I know that is a lot of money, my son, if we are now talking also about buying or building a house. Perhaps if the house is big enough you'll come back. With your girlfriend." His mother spoke in a bargaining tone, feeling her way into a new game.

"Perhaps, yes." Wome swallowed a mouthful of saliva at thought of returning soon to Douala. And yet the prospect of Maman in New York, if only for a week was equally fraught. He tried to concentrate on the present. "Pere may not like that we've not consulted him. Will you tell him it was your suggestion?"

Marguerite snorted a little laugh. "You think your father is the one to worry about? "Am I not the one with a stiff neck? Why did you not ask him to play intermediary?"

"You are more practical, Maman. If I had gone to Pere he would tell me what you wanted most was to come to Paris and New York." Franz was not in the slightest

impractical and his mother's eyes warned him not to push his luck. There was an air of grudging respect about her. Perhaps he no longer seemed soft.

Wome went out, feeling pleased with himself. Now, with departure imminent there were things to do. He went to the Bata store in Bonanjo and chose as a sly joke some Arab-style slippers, pointy and upcurved like Moorish daggers for Shokare.

Over the telephone, Sabine told him, "I lost the Midnight Mass battle with my mother. In the end it didn't seem like such a big deal. But the priest was gentle and the service was only an hour long. My mother was not pleased." Sabine giggled and Wome wished he were in bed with her. "Like all good Catholics she likes to suffer."

"Did you go out afterward?"

"No, we came home. My father was asleep and we got tipsy together on brandy, she and I. She was full of confidences."

Wome pictured Mrs. Montfort as a taller, more silvery version of Sabine. Her father was, he imagined, bluff and red faced with a walrus moustache. "Anything interesting?"

"Well, she thinks she was too young when she got married. And she sees my life as exciting and enviable. Full of possibilities and with many meaningful choices. I think she imagines me going to save lives somewhere exciting. Lebanon or Afghanistan. *Je t'assure*, Cheri, when you meet my mother, we'll have to prep you. You'll need to be dashing and a bit of a rogue. She thinks you're broad shouldered and mysterious."

Wome laughed, flattered. It did not surprise him that she would have frank, even sexual conversations with her mother. "Kah is....impossible to understand," he said in response to Sabine's question. "I suspect Kah's done something to piss my mother off. But I'll tell you about it when I see you."

Sabine said, "Are you ready to come back?" There was an another, subtler question beneath her words.

Wome exhaled. "In some ways, no. A lot feels unsettled. I miss you lots though."

"Me too. We'll be exhausted for about a week when you come back. I get in the same day as you. Earlier though. You'll come straight to mine?"

"I'll come straight to yours." It was a comfort to make plans. "Ok, Cherie, let see if I can make sense of my family" On the point of hanging up he blurted instead, "I feel like the head of the family, and wonder why it should be me rather than Kah."

It took less than half an hour to pack his things. Then he tried once more to remonstrate with Kah. "I've spoken to Maman. She's amenable but I think you should reassure her you're onboard after I leave." She stopped painting her nails and looked at him as at a stranger but then only nodded. "You're not going to tell me what's going on between you and Marguerite."

"There's nothing." Her lips were pursed.

Wome asked Pere to go for a walk with him. He did not know if it were because of his father's reticence they had not spent much time together but Franz seemed content enough to have his children at home. Wome let his father take the lead, curious to see where they would go. At a roadside café, Pere pulled out a chair and ordered two bottles of ginger beer. "I don't think Douala is your place anymore, Wome. I know your mother hopes you will come back but both Lagos and New York now stand between you and Douala." His father paused to drink then he said, "We will be fine here. We know how to manage, your mother and I. Just make sure you take care of your sister." Franz looked at Wome to make sure he understood and he nodded. He wanted to raise the matter of the house but he'd done enough.

So once again, the whole family went to the airport to say good bye. It seemed strange to Wome that it was he being seen off. Maman cried. "It was too short. Too short,"

she insisted. But she took hold of herself as Wome whispered he'd see her soon, perhaps in New York, and wiped the tears from her cheek. He felt like the family patriarch.

Kah's embrace was brief. Her eyes widened as she stepped back from him. "I'll see you in Paris." Between Wome and his father words were needless.

Shokare rang Ayiide from London on the morning of the New Year to see if she was at home. A little before noon he set down his grocery bags before her gate to ring the bell. He offered his mother no explanation for his two-day disappearance and she asked none. She returned to her accustomed work place after she let him in, the sleeves of her sweater had been pulled over her fingers against the cold. In the ashtray next to her papers there were two cigarette butts and Shokare wondered if she had worried.

He immediately began to wash up. "I'm going to make lunch. A stew. I hope you don't have plans."

"I'm not hungry."

It's freezing in here. You need to eat something."

She grimaced and chewed her pen. "I'll have a little bit." He saw she was sulking and considered asking her to help chop tomatoes but then just got on with it. It was easier to be reasonable with the feel and scent of a woman's skin still on his lips and fingers.

Rinsing chicken, he said to Ayiide "Why, you *dey* do style now, madam? No be say your shit dey brown like my own, sef?" He looked over his shoulder and saw his mother smiling against her will and he too smiled. If only it weren't so cold in the flat.

With the stew, she drank a glass and a half of wine, after which she relaxed enough to ask, "So how were things in the city, which is where I presume you were?"

"The same. I saw Kayode." Shokare laughed shortly. "Still the same guy. He says his mother lives in Saudi now?"

"Yes, she got some fancy job. She writes to tell me I should come out there. She could get me work easily. I wonder if she knows they read her letters."

"Who does?"

"The Saudi authorities. I've got nothing to hide but I don't want to live in a place where your correspondence is steamed open for no good reason."

"*Fashi dat.*" Shokare helped himself to a bit more of the stew.

"*Fashi dat.*" She kissed her teeth in agreement and they smiled at one another like naughty children.

"So if you've nothing to hide, Mama Ayiide, tell me about your cancer." Shokare wasn't in the habit of addressing his mother by her first name.

"What d'you want to know?"

"How advanced is it? Who've you told? What treatment are you getting?"

Ayiide exhaled. "It's advanced. It's almost certain I'll have to do chemotherapy."

"Are you afraid?"

She smiled a watery smile. "I am."

He decided against making light. "I'll come and take care of you if you want." The words made his eyes swim and he blamed his sentimentality on the wine. And the season.

"Ah, Shokare." His mother tried to laugh. "You've suffered enough for me already. For us."

"I don't know what you mean." He swallowed; the conversation had become maudlin.

Ayiide swiped a palm over her cheek. "At first I thought, why me, why now? I enjoy my work, life is comfortable." She looked about the flat then at Shokare. "You seem to be doing well in New York, you're well adjusted. You don't hate Ta...your father, do you?"

"No, I don't hate Tale." His own laughter also failed. "I wish him happiness. But you're my only real family. I want to feel you're connected to me, and I'm not just someone you feel guilty about. I know you did your best." Ayiide looked at him, purse lipped and he had no idea what she was thinking. Words choked him; wishes and dreams. If there had been a second child, a little sister, things might have been different. If Tale hadn't spent so much time working..... "Will you write me? I understand it's too expensive to telephone but write me at least."

His mother nodded, still weeping.

Shokare left for the airport feeling if not happier, at least certain a rapprochement and an agreement had been arrived at. He experienced a sort of relief at the prospect of resuming daily life. The terminal was a press of bodies and luggage. Even the hungover sun-starved faces of those stranded by bad weather did not disturb his mood. He cocooned himself in his music and submitted to the airport indignities. A man in a check in line parallel to his own resembled Wome in a superficial way; the similarity lay in the gangling posture and the small head. Funny how life goes, Shokare thought. Wome had chosen well with Sabine although he'd not chosen at all. His shyness had done the trick. Whereas Magda teased him before allowing him a mere seven weeks of herself. And he now had a three-thousand-dollar-a-month flat to get rid of and blotted memories of a few dinners, tender moments. As for June, his mind shied from the thought. He'd not made any new year's resolutions since adolescence but he decided to stay away from women for a time.

Three a.m. Wome's eyes blinked wide as he took in Sabine's familiar yet foreign bedroom. The ceiling stretched above him and he felt a flutter of vertigo. In his sleep, he'd shucked the covers but now the heat had subsided and his arm was prickled in goosebumps.

He lay, waiting for the radiator to begin its faint hiss. Sabine's forehead was pressed against his flank and he smiled listening to her slow, noiseless breathing, her catlike sleep. The sole concession she made to their separation was that her hand rested on his buttock. Outside the streets were quieter than she remembered as if New York remained on hiatus. Wome turned a little and touched her cheek. Sabine's arms snagged him but she did not wake. He surrendered himself to wakefulness. He was too enervated to sleep but after a swift hour the posture became uncomfortable. Still, he did not want to wake Sabine so he concentrated instead on the feathery reassurance of her inhalations.

As he was toweling water from his body, Wome said, "My relationship with my parents has reversed. It's as though they've become infants and now I'm the adult. They seemed so small and vulnerable and my first reaction was to offer to buy them whatever they needed."

Sabine stopped making coffee. "What d' you think they need?"

"Well, a house of their own would be a start. Things are not going well in Cameroon." He remembered Paul Biya's words on New Year's Eve. A superlative year. "I just want to make sure they have a roof over their heads."

Sabine came, milky and scrubbed, and sat in his lap. "How do they feel about you and Kah being so far away?"

"My mother wants us home. But she's not thought through what that means. Franz, my father, was of course pragmatic about things. And mysterious. But he's right. There's nothing for me in Cameroon." He did not mention Kah. "I felt out of place almost every minute I was there."

"How does your sister feel?"

"It's...I barely talked to Kah. She was so disengaged that I decided to concentrate only on the matter of the house. Anyway, we can talk about it later."



The Midtown streets were a reminder of the anticlimax of Wome's holiday. The commercial cheer, the bauble-laden trees had all been removed. Beneath a powdery sky, the pavements glistened with a dampness that was neither rain nor snow. The bitter cold seemed to affect the city's collective spirits; the only sounds were hoarse coughs and the splash of feet or tires.

Betsy was the first person Wome met in the office. She said, "How were the holidays?"

Wome put a brave face on things. "Good. I spent time with my family, saw one or two old friends."

"You went back home, right? To Africa."

"To Cameroon, yes." Amanda's face went foggy at this distinction.

Then Wome went to see Graeme. "Ahh, Wome. *Bonne annee*."

"*Bonne annee*, Graeme."

"Listen, what do you know about the Internet? All the top universities, MIT, Carnegie Mellon are installing access. Bill Remson thinks Landen need to be on it so we're making some staffers guinea pigs. We want to see if it boosts productivity. I put your name down."

Wome simply nodded. "And the merger?"

"That's on hold until end of the monthish." Graeme rocked his hand back and forth. "But I think there'll be a couple of trips in February. In the meantime, Kristin will get you back up to speed with your accounts."

Back at his desk, Wome pushed down frantic thoughts and scrabbled through his phone book looking for a number. None of the ones he tried worked so he called Segun.

"Segun, what's up? Do you have a number for Shokare?"

"Who dis?"

"Oh, sorry. Its Wome."

"Wome, it's a bit early. Hold on." The phone clunked as it was put down.

He listened to Amanda over the cubicle wall speaking to a client on the telephone and despaired at the prospect of resuming his former responsibilities. Segun began to read a number to him and Wome struggled to memorize it before fumbling for a pen. Segun said, "That's his pager. By the way, how's that sexy *omoge* of yours?"

"Thanks. She's fine. I'll tell her you said hi." He replaced the receiver to the sound of Segun's hiccupping laugh and sat back trying to gather himself to get on with his work.

Shokare's first feeling of homecoming came when two gloved African-American baggage handlers rapped a hip hop song to one another across the carousel. He tried to hide a smile as he thought, *Acatas*.

Despite the expense, he took a taxi to the Lower East Side. In his absence, Magda had removed her artifacts but had decided evidently to leave the bed for him. Doubtless, Issa had some even more sleek angular Japanese masterpiece on which the two of them might loll, although neither seemed the type to laze in bed. Magda had also tidied away Shokare's things, perhaps in a fit of guilt. The phone had been disconnected. Shokare set down his things and spun the radiator caps before he wandered up to Second Avenue in search of food. The cold bit more urgently here than in London and the city intruded on the senses more persistently, or perhaps the clutter of buildings amplified sounds and smells until they were overwhelming. He looked in at June's favourite bar as he passed but there was no one inside. Nor could he say if it was open. Perhaps she'd finally succeeded in overdosing.

The next morning he woke early feeling fresh and if not eager at least ready to resume the daily rituals. His stomach empty, Shokare took a cross-town bus on Houston and then made the short walk uptown.

As was his wont, Teun was already in the office. "Can you come in for a minute, Shok?" Shokare complied.

Teun sat bolt upright behind his minimalist, paper-free desk. "I'm afraid we're going to extend your probation, Shokare. One or two of the others don't think you're pulling your weight." He paused and looked away. "There was even talk of letting you go."

Shokare's first thought was, so this is Dutch efficiency. But he kept smiling. To avoid seeming witless, he said, "For how long?" Which others, he wanted to know. It must be Vanessa; she'd wanted a suckup. He did not know how to fight back. Demand an explanation in writing perhaps but he'd no idea of his rights.

Teun looked as if he'd anticipated stiffer resistance. "We'll give you three months more, effective immediately. I think that's plenty of time to win over the team."

"Uh, I appreciate it, Teun. But I've received no warning that my work was unsatisfactory. Its all quite sudden." He heard his accent change and he scarcely moved his lips as he added, "There's been virtually no feedback. I've been given no chance to respond to criticism."

Teun smiled, bloodless. Convenient for him that the others had not yet come in. Shokare suspected his boss had made this decision entirely alone. Although none of them, except maybe, just maybe, William might have registered a small protest. Shokare waited but Teun only said: "I'm sorry. There's nothing further to say."

Shokare sat back, hoping his eyes conveyed utter loathing. He thought of the cocaine thing and wished he had even slim proof. He refused to rule out blackmail if it came to that. "Actually, there's something I want to say. I resign, effective immediately." Perhaps

this was what Thomas & DaSilva wanted but if he were playing into their hands, so be it. He was sick of the pretense. Teeth clenched, Shokare stood too quickly and nearly swayed with sudden dizziness. Teun's eyes were watery and he gripped the edge of his desk as if in preparation for violence.

Shokare went to get his things. There was very little he needed: a few files to save to a floppy disk, some magazines he wanted to keep.

Teun followed. He was no longer smiling and he watched Shokare gather his things. "You don't have to do this, Shokare. I want you to stay."

Shokare raised his eyebrows and continued to rummage through his drawers. For appearances' sake, he took a couple of things he did not want. Beneath the desk was a scuffed bag he'd stopped taking home months ago and Shokare now fished it out.

"Have it your way then." Teun's gaze turned hard as though he'd come through tears. Shokare went to the elevator and got in without a backward glance. The doors slid closed as with a soldier's formality, Teun said, "All the best, Shok."

On Spring Street he found that he was sweating and he stopped to catch his breath. The street looked exactly as it had a half hour ago and Shokare told himself there was no cause for panic. He purchased a copy of the New York Times at West Third and put it beneath his arm. In a café on Bleeker Street he hunched over the newspaper but his mind still swirled. When he looked up he saw a great many people idling by in spite of the cold. I'm one of these, was his thought, but he had no name for it. Perhaps there was no name; it was one thing to be unemployed and independently wealthy but this was not his situation.

The smell of coffee brought him back to himself. He ordered a cup without sugar and turned his attention back to the classifieds. At each entry he muttered, "drone job." One film internship looked interesting; twenty hours a week with very little pay. He circled it

anyway. His pulse would race for a few moments as though from a belated spurt of adrenaline but he felt steady.

A story in the paper about a murdered British forger of art diverted him for a few minutes but he put it aside and forced himself to go item by item through the classified section. Perhaps, an unexpected career change was in the offing. A few days of sitting in cafes, alternately plotting and second-guessing might send one mad.

His coffee finished and the advertisements exhausted, he made a list of things to do. Sublet the apartment, he scrawled. Beneath, with a little more care, he put down: consider all my options. Part-time job? Image Banks? The pencil hovered above the sheet but he wrote nothing more. He paid and, having nowhere else to go in the middle of winter, he walked home, forcing himself to take even, unhurried steps.

The apartment's interior of exposed brick appalled him as never before. He laughed. It was difficult to feel he'd stumbled onto his freedom with this apartment like a mill about his neck. Only now did he realize how much he missed the comforting clank of his Brooklyn apartment, the foggy heat. He unfolded his laptop and rubbed itchy fingers over its beguiling black surface. Time to write, he told himself.

Mornings, he worked at the little kitchen table then moved to the bed when his back began to ache. It was dim in the bedroom and not so warm and getting beneath the sheets invariably brought on dreamless sleep. He left the kettle banked on a low heat so he could drink as much tea as he wished. He survived on toast and bacon grilled in the oven.

Ideas came to him and he began new documents, stabbing recklessly at the keyboard. His interests roved so that he might start to write something about the dangers of single-power hegemony then switch to a piece about France's love/hate relationship with America. By mid-morning of the fourth day, he'd discarded three of these as unintelligible but kept

another three as worth salvaging and perhaps publishable. He got up to pour hot water over the tea bag in his mug and the smell of his own rankness rose in his nostrils. He laughed, lit an incense stick and went into the shower. For twenty minutes, he let the scald of very hot water run off him then, against the cold, he dressed quickly, cobbled together a letter of interest for the film internship on his laptop and saved it onto his floppy drive.

On the streets he felt full of purpose, undismayed by free time and the despairing mood on the streets. Walking West on East Eighth street he halted at a newsstand and scanned through the Times classifieds. There was nothing new. After he faxed his CV he decided it was too cold to remain out of doors but he felt a restive need to be in motion from the huddled indoor days. Shivering at a Astor Place payphone, he telephoned Wome in the office.

Wome said, "You're laying low?"

"Been busy. How were the holidays?"

"Hard to say. Yours?"

"Good. Yeah. What's up?" There'd been neither snow nor rain but Shokare felt a humid bone-deep chill and wanted all of a sudden to be sitting somewhere warm with an inch of whisky in front of him.

"Are you on a pay phone?"

"Yeah. You want to meet for a drink?"

"Where?"

"Rialto. Just below Houston. Six." Shokare went toward Union Square on Broadway. In Strand book store the heating had been turned up very high so he took off his coat and slung it across his shoulder. But it slipped each time he shifted in the close, high aisle to let another browser pass, forcing him to snatch at it. Sweating, irate he chose a Moravia over wa Thiong'o's book. Then at the counter he convinced himself he could

afford neither and setting both books down, he left instead and went to Barnes and Noble. A salesperson who looked like of schoolboy age told Shokare the Moravia could be ordered, so he sat with the wa Thiong'o. It was afternoon and he found a seat easily and left his coat buttoned. He thought the heat bearable but he dozed in the comfortable seat and woke with a start of embarrassment. The Barnes and Noble was a haunt of the homeless and he did not want to be mistakenly ejected. But there was only one person in view and she was browsing the science fiction stacks with her back toward Shokare.

By five p.m., the sky was already inky with a deep blue haze. Wome, when he came up to the bar, seemed nervier than he had in a while. Without preamble he said, "You were right. About Douala. Things were strange, even with my parents."

"And your friends?" Shokare held the whisky in his mouth, savouring the burn of it.

"I only saw one. But he didn't see me as Wome, his friend from primary school. Douala is the same, more or less. A bit more broken down. I kept wanting to see the one I remember, the one in my head." He ordered a glass of wine.

Get yourself a stiff drink, Shokare thought and licked an amber drop from his lip.

"You were a child then."

"And my mother, for some reason wants me to come home."

"To help the country?" Shokare could not decide if he liked the new confidential Wome better than the other.

"Not necessarily. She misses us but she's given up on my sister." Wome swallowed and as though remembering his habitual diffidence, his essential Womeness, he said, "What about you?"

"My mother's not well. I'm trying to decide what do." On a slight tangent, Shokare went on, "England's the same: small, tired."

"Is it serious, your mother?"

"Possibly. I may go back in March. How's the job?"

"I should be going to France soon. Lyon. I should be excited."

"Why aren't you?"

"Too distracted." Like a man receiving another's confession, Shokare said nothing.

"How's your work?"

"Same. I still hate it. I've started looking for another job but I'm also thinking about grad school. Philosophy or something." All afternoon, he'd looked forward to seeing Wome, to being in another person's company but the intrusion of physical proximity and the weight of Wome's curiosity were becoming quickly burdensome. Shokare finished his whisky and although he would have welcomed another said, "Listen, I should get back to my writing." Perhaps what he'd needed was not company but to sit alone, unspeaking in the occluded warmth of the bar with the faint din from the kitchen coming to him.

But Wome had other ideas. "I wanted to ask you: do you regret not settling down with Tara?"

"Why Tara?"

Well, she's the person you've been most seriously involved with"

"What do you mean? I lived with Magda."

"Still, I'm asking about Tara."

"I thought about it." The line of questioning seemed the echo of an earlier one.

"But?"

"But what? I wanted to feel a certain way and thought I could with Magda. Didn't we have this conversation already?" Shokare looked into his glass. Perhaps because his stomach was empty, the whisky had given him a constricting feeling.

"But do you think you were wrong about Tara? Would you go back and tell her, I've learned my lesson. Can we try again?"



“What lesson?” Shokare demanded with a little asperity. “Tara’s moved on. You can’t go back.”

It would be wise, Shokare decided as he walked South and East, to avoid Wome. The conversation about Tara had depleted him. Wome’s harping on Tara seemed a kind of betrayal.

He felt nauseated and in no mood to eat. He wore his coat inside the flat until the kettle boiled and then sipping tea, he thought of his mother and imitated her by stretching the sleeves of his sweater over his hands against the cold. They were akin, hunkering in their unheated flats, reading, writing. Dreamy.

For hours at a stretch, he worked through his ideas then showered to put warmth into his skin. At odd unexpected intervals he slept. In the evenings, whether frustrated or satisfied, he pulled a shapeless wool hat across his ears and stole out to Strand or to Barnes and Noble.

After the first week of unemployment he stopped noticing the faces of other pedestrians and went about with his head down, his ears muffled by his headphones. As he had when a student he subsisted on slices of cheese pizza and falafel sandwiches but he did not yet want for money. Books sorely tempted him and CDs also. ‘I must see about getting this flat sublet,’ he told himself He did not want yet for money. He spent whole afternoons listening to CDs in the bowels of music stores and one day he went to the cinema on Third Avenue and saw three films, paying for only one. Greenwich Village lay beneath a shroud of anticipation; wearied of chilled feet and the mushroom smell of rain in the air, New Yorkers waited for a break in the cold, a few hours of sunshine.

From time to time, Shokare ventured into the subway but this was for novelty value; there was nowhere he went not within walking distance. By and by he’d become inured to

the cold and so the atmosphere in the subway struck him as hushed and sickly quiet, the banked warmth made him feel swaddled. The bark of a consumptive cough followed him through the tunnels and in the subway car he could not avoid staring into faces, in search of he did not know what.

Pared of nonfunctional interactions, his world began to collapse. Many days passed in which he spoke only to shopkeepers and he caught himself muttering his thoughts out loud like a crone. One silvery evening he went to a grimy call centre in China Town to place a call to the UK. He cleared his throat several times but his voice was none the worse for disuse. "Mama. How are you?"

"Shokare? I'm fine. How are you?"

He strained to detect fatigue in his mother's tone. "Same as always. Did you finish your manuscript?"

"Yes. I didn't think much of the ending though so I'm still working on it."

"Did you speak to your doctor?"

"Not yet. I have an appointment next week."

"How are your spirits?"

"I'm fine, Shokare. I miss having you here. You cheered me up."

His mother did not ask after his own spirits and he did not confess to being newly unemployed. This admission, he suspected, would disappoint Ayide. In any case if he tried to push past the numbness of his days to pinpoint whether he were happy or sad he touched nothing. He took small comfort there were no women to plague his life and from the queasy feeling he experienced at the mere thought of taking a drink.

He grew out his beard and let his clothes go unlaundered and went about bareheaded and shabby as if insensibility to cold were a badge of pride. By and by it became easier to neglect his writing. He'd achieved little after his initial burst of excitement and even this

seemed unfocused and shrill in reassessment. The fruitlessness of writing blinded him so he could not bear to look at the flat glow of the laptop's surface and he went out more and more.

Browsing books, he avoided familiar spots, sought less trafficked aisles. Familiarity breeds contempt, Ayiide said. Strand had more books to his taste but there were no berths for sitting. Standing in the gulley of a tall stacks, he watched people push brusquely by with ladders and his eyes followed to see if they were hunting esoteric texts. The typical Strand customer was a typical bibliophile: middle-aged, awkward bodied and often with a bushy face. There was no place for showing off or cruising in Strand, in fact no one with whom to flirt. Shokare saw an attractive thirtyish woman and maneuvered so he could see from the cover of her book if she were an imposter. Barnes and Noble drew a different species of browser; there, wandering eyes betrayed an interest in sexual contact as much as anything else.

For the span of a few days his pager sounded intermittently, perhaps once or twice each day. It was never the same number but he suspected Wome was trying to reach him. Instead, he impetuously took the uptown Six train and got down at 23<sup>rd</sup> street. Without haste he continued north. In shop windows were items of nondescript women's clothing pinned to mannequins, blouses and skirts in staid sandy colours that heralded spring. In corner stores which doubled as delis, biscotti tins had been piled high and congealed day old food moldered in metal bins.

It was too early for what he had come for. Nervous rather than cold Shokare kept his hands in his pockets and almost thirty minutes passed before he saw Wome step through the revolving door of Landen Jansen's headquarters. Directly in his wake followed an older man who seemed vaguely familiar. Wome slowed so this man might catch up and the two came to a stop at the bottom of the steps and drew their coats a little tighter about their

shoulders. They conversed for a minute or two—Wome stood in profile—and then he smiled in farewell and turned to go north. Wome's colleague passed a few strides away as Shokare started after Wome then slowed. What would he say? But he'd come this far for a reason. Between Thirty-second and Thirty third Streets, he hastened until he was steps behind Wome, close enough to leap forward and touch that domed head. He followed giddily in the other man's train, matching his steps as though in rediscovery of a childhood game. Wome's stride was purposeful and Shokare could not help but notice the elegant cut of his dark grey coat—Sabine's influence?—that fell below the knee. He felt shabby and dry mouthed with tension and the sudden fear of being discovered by Wome. His gait shortened and at thirty-seventh street he pulled up as if lame. Wome walked on heedless toward Forty-second Street, from where he would cross town and go to Sabine's. Certain knowledge of his friend's intended destination seemed to Shokare a kind of intimacy as he retreated to the anonymity of below 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

Books were no use; he was too tetchy and his strange shadowing of Wome had put his sanity in doubt. Whether he walked or rested, he found he was covered in sweat and he went to seek refuge in Angelika. He took one of the last seats, in a corner at the rear, for a German film but afterward he remembered only blurs and blinks of light, sensory fragments and the humidity of collective breathing.

Shokare called Wome at last but he seemed surprised. "I paged you once. Almost two weeks ago. Must be someone else. Let me call you later." The curtness stung but Shokare had other matters to worry about. The end of the month was days away and he'd made no plans or arrangements for a cheaper place. After much agonizing, he resolved to stay for another month. In his own way he'd settled into the Lower East Side flat. If not comfortable, it was a refuge of sorts and memories and traces of Magda had been effaced.

"We never go out anymore." As he said it, Wome knew he should keep his mouth shut.

"Hmmm. Sabine did not raise her head. She could remain reading for hours on her front whereas he got a crick in his neck within minutes. "I'm the one who's supposed to complain about these things, no?" Her feet dug into his ribs, but she was only shifting her weight. "Are you preparing for Douala?"

"Maybe." Wome pinched her calf. "Or maybe it's the boredom of domestic life."

"Well, you're taking lots of business trips; get a mistress."

"It wouldn't be the same. Not in a different city."

"Well, you could get one here even." Sabine exhaled loudly. "So what do you want to do, *Cheri*? About the fact that we don't go out. It's winter."

"We could have a dinner."

"With who?"

"What about Isabel?"

"Ok...."

"But then Guy?"

"I thought he was your friend."

"Shokare's friend actually."

She turned to look at him, pulling in her legs. "There's a name I don't hear much these days. What about him?"

Wome rose to make tea. "He's become a little....detached."

"Ok. So we have it. Shokare and Isabel."

## February

For a day or so after he paid his rent, Shokare went about with a grimace. In his bank account remained less than \$2000. He permitted himself moments of extravagance to allay fears of being thrown out onto the street. Sushi one day or the new Wally Badarou, which he decided he didn't actually like.

The cold weather broke and an angling rain fell with scent of freshness that had been lacking during the prior weeks. The ensuing climb in temperature was accompanied by sustained sunshine. In Washington Square Park, the comedians had come out from their winter hiding places to raise a few laughs and earn some change. The crowds were as yet too small for the fire eaters and tumblers. He bumped into a Saint Lucian from whom he'd bought 'sess' before. Mikey didn't look well. Shokare was prepared to offer the man his hat but instead bought a dime bag from him.

"I hope it's good shit." They sat like lovers in a gale, his mouth to the dealer's ear. Pigeons waddled in a swarm here and there, scouring among the flagstones for crumbs.

"It's good, it's good." It was difficult to understand Mikey through his thick accent and the chattering of teeth.

"Get yourself inside, man. You're sick," Shokare accused.

"I gots ta sell a couple more, couple more dime bags, bredren."

Shokare moved off; concern could get him in trouble. He went down to West Fourth Street and got onto the A train. By his reckoning, the A train was the king of the New York subway; the longest line and the fastest route from south to north. Racially, it was two lines, almost. After 59<sup>th</sup> street, didn't BMT stand for Black man's Train?

Shokare and Dabo smoked Mikey's marijuana in Dabo's cousin's restaurant and Shokare tried to discuss these matters but Dabo had other concerns. "What you doing with yourself, man? You find another job?"

"Not yet. Been too busy writing, surviving. Trying to stay warm." Shokare had never seen Dabo take his coat off. The man's lips were white.

"Surviving, what you mean? They fighting where you live? No food?"

"I'm not sure what I want to do."

"You need a wife, man"

"I do? You don't have one." Shokare was glad of the cold; the marijuana made him too drowsy. Mikey hadn't cheated him; it was good cannabis if a little harsh. As usual, the *Tiebu Djeun* took a long time to reach the table. Typically the first servings of it were not so moist. Shokare liked the middle portions, which had soaked up spices and palm oil. The portion of fish was large but he'd been given too much carrot and not enough cassava.

"I don't have wife here. No girlfriend even." Dabo looked as if he himself could not believe this. "But I have wife in Senegal. And one little boy. That keep me serious."

"I need something else to keep me serious." Shokare ran his finger on his plate and licked it.

"If not a woman....." Dabo rose, handed the relit joint to Shokare and went into the kitchen. There were no real customers in the restaurant but it was too early. An older Senegalese man Shokare had seen before was reading a newspaper by dim orange light. Later, two of the four tables might be occupied. Shokare wondered if the restaurant fronted some other business. The *Tiebu Djeun* was good but not the best on 118<sup>th</sup> Street although it came cheap, and seasoned with Dabo's wisdom.

Tall and stooping, Dabo came back. "If not a woman then a duty." Shokare took the pamphlet from his hand. Cheik Anta Diop, it said and it was battered, much used.

Shokare remembered something. "Are you *Mouride*, Dabo?"

"I am not. But I read their books. The *philosophe* is strong. *Mourides* are very hard working."

"So are Protestants."

Dabo shrugged lanky shoulders. "For you, it's not difficult to follow. You're Nigerian. Nigerian, Senegalese, we the same. Wherever we go, no one like us."

"It's true." Shokare huddled down in his coat as though the thought itself were a source of chill.

"Go to Alioun bookstore, around the corner on Saint Nick. Buy the book *Teachings of Anta Diop*. I'm telling you, man, you need a duty. That's it."

The fluorescent strip lighting in Alioun's hurt Shokare's eyes. The shelves were stacked with a hodge podge. African history and philosophy, with some tracts peddling pseudoscience. He flicked through a book titled *Sun People, Ice People* about Africans and Europeans, the theory appealing because facile. Egyptian arcania. The *Mysteries of Tombouctou*. The *Anta Diop* book cost twenty dollars. Edgy from cannabis smoke and Alioun's heavy stare, Shokare paid, hoping he hadn't been mistaken for an African American looking up his roots.

The starchy food crouched in his abdomen made him torpid and the night's chill laid his bones bare. The prospect of crossing Manhattan on foot daunted him so for 10 minutes he wandered sweating through the labyrinth of Forty Second Street station, to transfer to the east side and the Six train. At Astor Place he got down. In crossing Fourth Avenue, he needed to be wary not just of oncoming cars but of skateboarders.

Clutching his new book, which from haste he'd not returned to his bag, Shokare reached Sixth Street and saw June. She was proceeding west, toward him but coming down the other pavement. The woman beside June was, to judge from her height a model; Shokare



could hear, if not words, the breathless pitch of her voice. Shokare's heart caught and he felt both thankful and dismayed that she did not see him. He'd forgotten how austere elegant she was in appearance and attitude. Beneath the streetlamp she was pale as a kabuki figure and outshone her companion, who Shokare barely glanced at. He knew June well enough to recognize she was high, very high; there was an alert tension in her neck as she listened to her companion, a stilted way of walking, as though her boots were taller than they actually were. He did not slow, he did not dare to. It was better to be casually noticed than to loiter in the hope of being spotted. But he did not discard the thought of calling out until he reached the end of the block and June had been lost from sight.

He walked in front of the bar from which she'd undoubtedly come and despised himself for the searching way he looked in as though some trace of her might remain. At home, he experienced a weariness across his shoulders as he made tea that couldn't be explained by earlier fatigue. You thought you hated June, he thought. That you'd put her behind you entirely. He could not shut away the shock of longing that he'd known in the instant he recognized her. And the sharper because she was drugged out of her head. Had she been sober he'd have felt nothing save pity, perhaps. Mingled with respect for the addict trying to put her life in order. She'd deserve that at least. But certainly no regrets. But he perceived scales had been lifted from his eyes. Pray, he chided himself, you don't come face to face with Magda and so disgrace yourself.

He delved beneath moist sheets and read listlessly about Cheik Anta Diop until two am, his face half-tucked beneath the coverlet.

In the morning there was a number on his pager. It was already after nine o'clock on a sunless winter day. He stood beneath the shower for a long time, too numb to stir, but the hot water failed to revivify him.

The payphone at First Avenue and Fifth Street had been eviscerated but Shokare lifted the receiver anyway and was surprised to hear a dial tone.

“Wome speaking.”

“Wome, what’s up?”

“Shokare. Are you free for dinner on Thursday. At my place.

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Shokare tasted bittersweet disappointment. He repeated the details Wome passed to him, trying to not seem sulky and then rang off.

Despite the relative warmth out of doors, he set to work on a critique of Hollywood’s portrayal of the poor. In the microwave he heated baked beans until they fizzed and slopped them over tranches of stale half-toasted bread.

Into the early afternoon, Shokare typed and reread his piece. He guessed a magazine like *Atlantic Monthly* might run it. He threw on his coat over a singlet and loped to Barnes and Noble at Astor Place to hunt out submission information. Inevitably scented the air; he knew the piece would be published.

But single-minded trips to Barnes and Noble were impossible for him. Before the magazine stacks, the temptation to begin flicking through publications—*Mother Jones*, *Prospect*—was too great. He allowed himself to begin reading an article about the Tories and as he was putting down the *Spectator*, his eyes came to rest on June’s downcast face not two metres from where he stood. But it was not her—this woman was Caucasian although her shoulder-length hair had a particularly Asian sheen. And she was more womanly than June, softer. Shokare stared for a moment, drunk in the sight of those everted lips and obvious youth. She appeared to feel the weight of his eyes and, looking up, she caught his eye before lowering her head with certain impudence. Shokare continued to look, awaiting further eye contact but she simply smiled into her design magazine, saucily enough that Shokare read it as a signal for him. Her mouth had been painted with a faint gloss of

oxblood lipstick and she shifted so her hip was outthrust, cocking her head in the same moment. But with the suddenness of a rebuff Shokare remembered he'd not cleaned his teeth. He went to turn aside then hesitated, still hoping to salvage something from the flirtation. Lazily though, and without a second look in his direction, the woman took herself off toward the café, buttocks drawling beneath her skirt.

You're losing your touch, he thought. In the Fordham days, an unwashed mouth could never stop you. His hands shook as he replaced the magazine. He hurried to the bathroom and almost barged a man off his feet. At the last moment Shokare caught him by the shoulders to steady him. Inside the stall, he wrinkled his nose at the smell, flicking the catch to lock the door. The floor was muddy and squalid but Shokare let his trousers slump to his knees at the same time his other hand freed his penis, which had the beginnings of stiffness. He'd had no thoughts about sex since London but now he wrung his penis. After a minute, he wished for oil or some other lubricant but there was no need. In the moments before release, warmth flushed up his throat and threatened to overcome him. His ejaculate spattered high up on the wall and he allowed himself to sag almost into a posture of prayer. He'd begun to sweat and now felt sheepishness as he tucked into his undershorts, his weeping penis. The absurdity of stealing a few half-seconds of orgasm like a vagrant. He laughed, feeling the last few spasms in his groin and fastened the button of his pants.

"So Shokare's coming?"

"He should be here any minute. Was Isabel nervous about coming to Brooklyn?"

"No. why?"

The buzzer sounded. Sabine said: "Ah. C'est Isabel." But it was Shokare who trailed Wome up the stairs. He was dressed mawkishly: too-tight jeans, stiff black lace up shoes and a duffle coat. He gave Sabine a clumsy kiss and thrust a bottle of red wine into her

hands. There was an awkward instant in which Sabine waited vainly for Shokare to buss her other cheek.

He'd not seen Sabine since October at the East side flat. He remembered with a faint embarrassment the frank leer he'd directed at Sabine the first day they'd met. There was gone reason for her antipathy to him.

But Sabine took care to let nothing of her feelings show. She tolerated him, Shokare suspected, because of his friendship with Wome but would set him down with sharp words if it came to that. "How have you been, Shokare?" The question was asked with a matron's pale disapproval of an in law. The lust that had gnawed fitfully at Shokare over the previous few days flared anew, prickling his groin. He accepted a glass of wine, and studied Sabine's figure. Her loose black dress did not disguise how finely drawn she was.

He assumed a serious face. "Can't complain. Other than the weather." How British, he thought, to inject the weather so soon into the conversation.

As if she'd seen into his mind, Sabine said, not quite asking, "You were in England for the holidays." She turned and set down the bottle of wine he'd brought, taking a moment to assess its quality. Wome watched as if wanting to intervene. Sabine went on, "Wome, do you want to open another bottle so it can breathe."

Wome came and took it from her hand. Shokare sidled a few steps away, to mask the lust he suspected was rising off him with a palpable heat.

The buzzer rang again. In Wome's absence, Shokare said, "It's been quite a while, Sabine." It sounded hammy, like a line from a musical. Sabine neither spoke nor looked at him. Shokare did not repeat himself. But Sabine had been simply settling herself. It was after all her boyfriend's flat and so the floor beneath her feet must feel safe.

"Yes, it has, Shokare." Her eyes took him in over the rim of her glass, which she held before her face but did not drink from.

He felt compelled to rise to the considering tone of her voice, the challenge. Why was he drawn always drawn to the cool ones, he thought and wanted to seize her by the shoulders and bite her pale lips until they bled. "Look, I know you don't like me...its obvious you never have." The sudden smell of meat roasting caused his stomach to grumble.

They heard steps, the click of heels and Sabine smiled but Shokare suspected it was not relief. "What makes you think that?"

Isabel came in, denying Shokare opportunity to answer. The women kissed one another, crooning endearments. Isabel too wore black but her dress was form fitting. The spikiness of her boots reminded him of June an instant but he'd already begun to compare the two women, blonde and brunette, before him. Isabel conformed to the norms of prettiness: her lips were fleshy but not too wide and her nose pert. Her form was athletic but curvy but Shokare did not rate her above Sabine, who possessed a steely, wiry fighter's frame and whose face, with its slim-cheeked aquiline detachment, cared nothing for artificial allure.

Isabel offered Shokare her hand and he thought her too indiscriminating with her smiles. They sat to eat at the cramped faux-antique table, The other three content to let Wome, as host, cajole a conversation from the slightly tense atmosphere. Shokare took small sips of his wine and Wome followed suit, perhaps because Sabine gulped at hers. From Shokare's childhood sprang a sudden memory of glimpsed dinners parties at which only the men at the table talked.

Once, over the roast lamb Shokare's eyes met Sabine's. In her refusal to look away he read a great many things: an effort to confront some fear; incitement, perhaps or even effrontery. Her eyes were glassy with what might have been unshed tears. Shokare was grateful he could not blush. He turned to Wome. "Aren't you supposed to be going to Lyon any day now?"

"Montreal again." Wome looked rueful. I'll be away for over a week." Was this a dare? An invitation to seduce Sabine?

Shokare swung to face her with an exaggerated motion. "You're not going with him?" He felt flushed with boldness, despite having drunk very little of his wine.

"I have a job, Shokare. I'm not a housewife." That she laughed only made her more waspish. What he'd mistaken for mere tipsiness was much more advanced; there was a besotted aspect about the way Sabine sat bolt upright even as she directed close attention toward her plate.

'But you work for the UN. You can take time off, surely,' Shokare thought but the taunting words would not roll off his lips. He was afraid, although he shied from the word, to see how mean a drunk she might be. And, Isabel too warned him with a look; she was not oblivious to undercurrents as it seemed.

Sabine went out for a cigarette and Wome followed, leaving the dishes still on the table. Shokare imagined a conversation on the stoop full of recrimination. Isabel drank her wine, ignoring Shokare until he spoke. "So how much longer are you in New York?"

"I don't know. I want to stay. I'm not ready to go back to Strasbourg"

"Oh, that's where you're from?"

"Yes, do you know it?"

He shrugged. "I've heard of it, of course. I went to Paris once. High school trip. Nice place."

"You're from where? Isabel fished out a cigarette packet and lit one, which brought a harsh laugh from Shokare. Her eyebrows came up quizzically as she expelled smoke.

"Sorry. It's just that Sabine went out for a smoke so as to spare us. They may as well have stayed in here." He wished he were drunker. "I'm from Nigeria. Do you know it?"

"Lagos, no? My father is a big supporter, fan...it's the right word, no? Of Fela." She pronounced the names Laag-os and Fey la. Shokare watched her, seeing at last some truth in the cliché about smoking being sexy.

When Wome and Sabine came back laughing and holding hands, Shokare said, "Isabel thinks we should take a trip together."

"What kind of trip?" Sabine asked. Then as if to prove she could not be cowed she said with unmistakable innuendo, "You don't like the wine? Or do you need to be sober for something later?"

Shokare held out his glass. He too could play along. "I'll have some. So Isabel wants to go camping. In the Ozarks or somewhere else full of inbred Americans. I'm thinking a beach trip. Miami or Puerto Rico. Laze in the sun all day. Drinks with umbrellas," He wagged his shoulders in as vaguely Latin way. "Dancing at night." Self-imposed sobriety had worked him into a strange mood.

Wome looked at Sabine, who said, "Why not? Winter's driving all of us mad." She let her eyes flit briefly over Shokare's face. "It would be nice to go somewhere where we could dance to zouk though. I'm not so keen on salsa."

"Zouk, it is." Shokare drummed the table twice, and hard, ignoring the looks from Wome and Sabine. "What's zouk?" Isabel laughed.

"So Martinique then?" Isabel said, as if tickets were to be booked that very minute. "I'm an au pair. I can't afford this."

Isabel took the idea of a trip quite seriously and continued to talk about it on the way to the subway. Shokare did not want crush her excitement by saying it would not happen and instead linked arms with her. He wanted to ask her out for a drink but could not afford it. He remembered he was in Tara's neighbourhood and wanted, peevishly, to bump into her. But there were no pedestrians although it was not quite half past ten. He'd forgotten

that the wind did not cut quite so keenly through Brooklyn. Still, he pitied the drug dealers idling on Fulton Street.

"I'd like another drink," Isabel admitted. "These couples, they go to bed so early. But I must get back. The family I work for, they don't like this when I come in late." She gave Shokare her number. "You can call before 9 o'clock only. Let's meet for a drink."

Relieved and aroused, Shokare too went home. The warmer weather failed to lift the cold in the flat and the didacticism of the Anta Diop book frustrated him. Outside, all was still and heavy. He got up and sat at his work table, which he'd moved so as to catch a few hours of slanting sun on his hands and face. He felt particularly proud of one paragraph:

Hollywood's obsession with the tribulations of the affluent, which are, when contextualized, comparatively trivial, serve to further banish the underclasses to cultural oblivion. Poverty and lack of opportunity are one's own fault and implicitly it follows that if you are poor your story must be inconsequential, and thus, does not deserve to be told.

The following afternoon he telephoned Ayide. He knew her mood as soon as she answered. "Mama, what's wrong?"

"I'm starting chemotherapy next week. It's spread, Shokare. More than they expected."

"Will your health insurance cover it?"

"I think so. Can you ring me later. Doctor Thorn is to call me back and I don't want to tie up the line."

Shokare went out to check his bank balances. 1100 dollars and another 200 in his checking account. Calculating, adding numbers in his head, cold clutched at him in an unfamiliar way. He bought a newspaper but it was too unwieldy, hefty to flick through on his feet so he thrust it raggedly beneath his armpit and hunted for change. The earpiece of the pay phone was uncomfortably warm



"Yeah?"

"Oga, you gonna be home for a minute. I'ma come through there."

"Na who dis?"

"Shokare, of course." He hated talking to Segun. In the background came the blurt of Tope's voice shouting in Yoruba.

"Cool. We dey for house."

In Brooklyn, Tope let him in to the apartment. "I just dey take am easy. You know how Yankee can tire someone," Shokare told them when they asked where he'd been. He sat on the sofa, which was still covered in plastic. It was warm enough that the window had been cracked the window.

"We know how much you love Yankee," Segun smirked and took up the controller for his video game.

"So, what's good, Shokare?" Tope sat at the dining table as if he knew Shokare would appreciate privacy.

"I need a favour." He pitched his voice low. "I have to get my hands on some money in a hurry."

"A loan. How much?"

Shokare said, "Not a loan. I no get job. I can do some work for you, for a couple weeks. However long it takes to make 5 or 7 grand."

"What makes you think you could do it?" Tope watched him.

"I'm sure I can do it."

"Why do you need the money? Look I can give you two thousand. No pay back. You're my brother."

And then you'd be rid of me for ever, Shokare thought. "That's not enough, Tope. I know I can make you some money." He exhaled, wanting to make an appeal.

"Ok, let me talk to someone. One of my boys does something you can probably get involved in." Tope took up a baseball cap and pulled it low over his forehead so that Shokare could not see his eyes. A smug triumph played over his pale, abused lips. "*Ombo*, don't worry now. We go sort you."

Shokare did not persist. Tope rolled up some marijuana and they smoked together. Then Tope got up and Shokare listened to the muffled thuds and slaps from the video game.

When Tope came out of the bedroom, he said, "Let's go and get some *egusi* around the corner."

Shokare's head felt muzzy with urgency but he found an appetite for okra soup with snails and dried fish and continued to press morsels of pounded yam into his mouth long after he was full. All three of them had a red film of oil on their lips. As Shokare pushed away his plate Segun was calling for more *eba*.

Later that afternoon, Tope paged him and Shokare phoned back immediately. "My boy go page you. Two of you can meet and arrange someting. I never tell am say you wan do dis for few weeks only." Shokare did not like Tope's quiet threat as he rang off. "I trust you no go spoil my name."

The temperature passed 50 degrees, and came very nearly to sixty. A brisk wind blew, with only a slight bite, carrying a smell like scour. Shokare was restive. But rather than come out and allow sunlight to wash clean his bleak mood, he paced, without urgency or tension, from bedroom into the kitchen, trying to not fixate on the pager which lay at the edge of the blonde table.

As night came on, he poured bean soup from a can into a saucepan. As he mopped up the last of the bland soup with a tasteless sliver of white bread into his bowl, he received

the communication he'd been waiting for. Once. And then a second time seconds later. He picked up the pager and went out.

The voice held no urgency. "Can you meet me now? In Brooklyn."

Shokare said he'd need an hour.

"No worry. Junior's. 9:15"

The Flatbush Avenue sidewalk just over the bridge had been dug up. Wide-bore pipes were stacked man high and the stutter of many jackhammers assaulted Shokare's ears. He threaded his way past debris, shielding his eyes against the glare of floodlights, and into Junior's. There were many patrons in the booths but only one man who sat by himself. Chizoba had oily yellow skin and drowsy eyes. He was shorter than Shokare, and thin and eating a piece of cheese cake with great relish. He pressed Shokare to join him but the atmosphere in the restaurant was sticky with the smell of confection sugar, and Shokare dared not test his nervous stomach.

Chizoba wasted no time. "Na phone scam I do. There's many ways to do this, which I can show you. But I try to convince them to give me a credit card number or bank account details. To secure the deal." Like a child, he ran his tongue over his fork. "Na psychology. You have to think on your feet and what you say depends on who answers the phone. You get about 15 seconds to enter their heads. Guess their weaknesses."

Shokare did not try to conceal his fatigue. "It's easiest with old people, isn't it? Lonely old women with no one looking after them who don't imagine anyone would try to con them."

Chizoba's plate was empty and his pale hand went up to signal the waitress. He laughed, but it was brief as a sneeze. "No be nice business, I can't lie to you. But it's not only old people." He sat back. "Anyway, nah your choice. But you have a Yankee accent small, small."

“Well, I no go lie either. I need the money.”

“Come tomorrow.” He put a card next to Shokare’s glass of water. “About eleven. We go try some numbers together. But make I tell you first how it works. Credit cards numbers are yours for a week, you can do *whetin* you want. After that, if they still work, you have to share with me. Fifty percent of any money transfer is mine.”

Shokare ran the conversation through his mind on the platform of DeKalb Street Station. It had come to this: gulling senile dowagers out of their last few thousands and leaving them to rot and die unloved, untended. Better surely to beg Tale but he knew he would not.

He shut out the raving of his thoughts by concentrating on the clumsy idiomatic writing of the Anta Diop book. A wall of silence had sprung between himself and the living world and no sound touched him. The clamorous ambitions and lusts of New Yorkers held no interest.

Out of penitence, Shokare ate nothing and allowed only unsugared tea past his lips. Without touching it, he leaned back in his chair before the black laptop and peered into its dimmed screen as if enigmas might be uncovered there. He itched to dash the machine to the floor and stamp until its circuits lay wracked and bare and its keys were strewn across the room. But for what? Catharsis? Manumission?

He turned Isabel’s number over and over in his palm early in the morning as he tried to work up the will to telephone her. Perhaps fucking would release him from guilt and hesitation but his genitals were dormant or defunct. Awareness of his bodily state was slipping away. If he ate or he fasted it made no difference; Sleep and wakefulness were the same.

He went to meet Chizoba. In Bedford Stuyvesant the Avenues rang with African-American voices, still drawly from a decades-earlier migration. He found the address

Chizoba had given him off Atlantic Avenue. A sign in cracked red glass said: West Africa Express Shippers. A man he did not know came to answer the door.

Shokare's lips balked at phrasing a sentence. "Chizoba?"

"In the back."

Inside were stacked cardboard boxes and broken ladders and a dead-animal smell. Shokare passed through a heavy black curtain which numbed the air so the sound of his footfalls died without echo. Through the dusty window of a tiny cubicle, he saw Chizoba with the phone to his ear. With flapping fingers, he gestured Shokare over.

"Listen while I make this call. Then you can try one yourself." Chizoba assumed an atrocious American accent, "Hey, how you doing. Am I speaking to Peter? My name is John Samuel and I have....." He listened for a few moments then replaced the telephone.

"Men are hard," Chizoba said, not looking at him. "But even if they say they're not interested, keep talking until they hang up."

It was Shokare's turn. Chizoba scanned the list of names. "Call.....Margie Denits in Illinois."

Shokare set down his bag and tapped in the number. It rang three times before a man answered. Shokare was so surprised he forgot his pitch. "Hello. Can I speak to Margie?"

"Who is this?" The voice no longer sounded blasé.

"Ahh. I'm calling from National Sweepstakes." And that was as far as he went for there was a click and the hum of a dial tone.

"Not bad but give them a name. It's very important. Establishes trust." Chizoba had plainly spent time poring over some marketing guide. "Try one more. Larry Misen. He read off the number.

Shokare was rolling his shoulders as if about to enter a boxing ring. There was an answer on the first ring. "Hi. I'm Gary McMahon from Winners Sweepstakes. Am I speaking to Larry, Laurence Misen?"

"Speaking." It was the voice of a man in late middle age. Overworked. Cautious.

"I'm calling you, Mr. Misen to offer congratulations. You've won quite a lot of money in our lottery."

"I don't play the lotto." Misen did not sound inclined to hang up.

"Well, I've got your winning ticket right here." Shokare hunted for the man's address on the sheet; Chizoba was waving and shaking his head. "3212 Porch Avenue, Des Moines. That's your address, right?"

"Sure is"

"Well, then perhaps your wife filled one out in the supermarket." Shokare was beginning to enjoy himself. "Can we proceed with this, Sir? The best way to pay is via direct deposit into your checking account."

Pleasantly, Misen told him, "Send me confirmation in the mail first. Good day." The line went dead. Chizoba shook his head once more but he was impressed.

"I thought I had him." Shokare kissed his teeth. He rested the receiver across his thigh, wondering how much a man like Misen kept in his bank account.

Shokare went down the list he'd been given, scratching off place names like Grosse Pointe, OshKosh, Jennings, Lansing, Sioux Falls. The citizens of these towns were no more gullible than New Yorkers. Dialing, he swallowed to clear away a slick phlegm in his throat from the previous rebuff and so begin brightly. The name Gary McMahon stuck; it was indefinably a name from middle America, perhaps Chicago or Detroit but old fashioned enough it could not be the name of a Manhattanite or someone from San Francisco.

He got up to ease his muscles and his cricked neck. He'd lost track of the time. Just outside the door, a coatless Chizoba was smoking a cigarette and proffered it to Shokare. He accepted then wished he hadn't. The cheap tobacco was heady and there was nothing in his stomach. He leaned against the brick of the wall, looking at the impossible beauty of the sky, mottled with reds and blues and frilled clouds. His throat swam and he ached to spit but held it for fear he would choke. He handed the cigarette back and turned to go back inside but Chizoba barred the way. "Ombo, go home. You're tired. Take a sleeping pill if you need to. But this is the hardest thing to do if you're tired."

He managed to stay awake on the train. At home he slipped himself beneath icy bedsheets and dreamt little vignette dreams that made no sense. A fierce craving for sushi that roused him, and he saw it was midnight. Unsteady on his feet, he went out. The weather was in flux and had begun to turn wintry once more and Shokare shivered in his thin woolen sweater. The restaurants were closed, or they remained open and their kitchens were shut. He was mystified at the sight of people sitting up talking and drinking as if he himself had never done such a thing. He had no appetite for anything besides fish and without the least regret, he turned about and returned home. The ease with which he toppled back into sleep despite the void of his belly was a shock.

Shokare ate nothing until the third day after he met Chizoba. The roil of hunger pangs from his famished gut woke him at 7 a.m., and he went to the Associated Supermarket on Avenue A and bought eggs, bacon, a melon. He cooked a meal from the entire packet of bacon and four eggs but his stomach rejected the salty, oily food. He succeeded in forcing only a little melon into his shrunken belly.

Late in the afternoon, Chizoba called him in to his booth and held out a slip of paper with a sixteen digit number penned on it in small, very precise writing. "I asked Tope

to make me up a card. If you go and collect it for me, I'll make it worth your while." He handed Shokare an envelope with money.

Shokare went to the S train irritated by Chizoba's good luck. That and the man's pity. Despite his college education and 'London' accent he'd been brought so low even scamming fatuous parochials was beyond his ability.

As the train juddered out of the station Shokare donned his backpack so it hung open at his chest. At his back was the door to the garret that housed the train driver. With the pretense of rummaging, he counted Chizoba's money. Two thousand dollars. Brooklyn seethed beneath banked skies, but from the height at which the S train rolled, the borough had a grandness absent at ground level. The money was not enough.

Segun latched the chain of the front door to block Shokare's entry. He said, "*Brodda*, you get de cash?"

"Of course, now" He was allowed into the hallway, but no further. The flat smelled of plantains, stale oil. Segun did not seem to need light to count the money. Where was Tope?

"Stay here." Segun took the envelope then returned with it. "*Shomo*, it's going well with Chizo?"

"Not bad. Is Tope here?"

"He's busy."

"Tell him to page me."

"No problem, *sha*."

Chizoba accepted the envelope and gave Shokare one hundred and fifty dollars. Is that all, he thought, but lacked the strength. He had not even bothered to take a look at the card. All the lights had been switched off at West Africa Express Shippers; clearly Chizoba



was in a hurry. "I wan use am quick, quick." He grinned to reveal sharp canines. See you tomorrow at the same time?"

"Actually I go call you. I get office work tomorrow." The lie came easily.

"Come afterward. Better you develop a rhythm for this *kin' ting*." Shokare let this advice go without a response. Chizoba got into a white Toyota sedan and drove away.

Shokare went into Honshu on Second Avenue and ordered a lot of sushi, which he knew he would not finish. He sat looking at the lumps of fish, wished he'd chosen a book, but he did not take them home with him. With the last of his energy, he composed an advertisement to sublet the flat and then was knocked quickly asleep by the Anta Diop book.

In the morning, he unfolded his laptop and read an essay he'd begun some months before about American anti-intellectualism. Then he got up to go and telephoned Chizoba to tell him he would not come at all today. Next, he tried the number Isabel had give him. A man answered in a voice that was aloof, even suspicious. He became if not friendly, coolly courteous as Shokare asked in his most coaxing, English tones for Isabel but she had gone out to fetch the children.

At first he feared his mother had drunk too much wine. "Shokare. I was hoping you'd call," she slurred at him.

"Are you ok, Mama?"

"I had my first chemotherapy session today. Just a short one. My nurse is Ghanaian. She took very good care of me." Ayiide was smiling; Shokare imagined her baring her crooked front teeth.

"Do you have to go every day?"

"No," she laughed a dreamy giggle.

"Is anyone checking up on you at home?"

"Yes. Don't worry." Ayiide made an effort at coherence for his sake. "I'm fine. Your mama is not going anywhere just yet."

But once he put down the phone, he could not hold back tears. Ayiide had not once asked when he was coming.

### March

Wome was enthralled by the Internet. The office with its hums and clicks was sunk in the silence and gloom of dusk but he continued to pore over information about Douala, Lagos, even Bafut. Some of it seemed unlikely, even unreliable but this was part of the appeal. Telephones in far-off cubicles trilled in faint echoey flurries like a continual call and response. So Wome started when his own line buzzed. He thought it would be Sabine but it wasn't.

"Wome," Shokare's voice was faint, as though he'd telephoned from halfway across the world.

Wome kept impatience from his tone. "Shokare. Where are you?"

"I'm in Brooklyn. I'm by yours." He drew a sharp breath as babies do before a gust of wailing. "Wome, we need to talk."

"I'm listening. What's up?"

"Come. I need you to come home."

"What is it? Shokare?" There was a silence that Wome took as indication the line had gone dead. But after a moment Shokare repeated himself as though too tired for explanation. Wome heard the receiver replaced and sat dumb. He looked at his watch and reached for the phone again to call Sabine. But it rang once more.

"Yes?"

But it was not Shokare this time. "You need to sort out your boy. He don focked up badly."

"Segun?"

"Dis Tope. Have you spoken to Shok? Where is he, *sef*?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Don't bullshit me. That fockin *ajebota* may have put me in serious *wahala*."

"I haven't heard from him." Wome tried to steady his voice.

"Ok. No wahala." Tope's amusement was stark. I seemed immaterial whether Wome was telling the truth. "But, *wallabi*, when I catch him.... And Brooklyn dey small. We go find 'im."

Wome hurried outside and got into a taxi. Shit. He'd forgotten to telephone Sabine. A nerve on the inside of his thigh had begun to kick and spasm. An insubstantial slantwise rain fell, slowing traffic. Wome's agitation rose in anticipation of the delay but he said nothing.

The taxi set him down at Fulton and Fort Greene and it was raining more heavily in Brooklyn. The wet asphalt muffled his hurried steps and as he came up to his gate, he saw Shokare squatting on the stoop, the hood of his coat pulled forward; Shokare appeared engrossed in the stone beneath his feet.

Wome called softly to him and Shokare allowed long seconds to pass before he looked up wretchedly. Wome thrust down the obvious question. "Let's go inside." He stifled the urge to help his friend get to his feet. With a steadiness of hand he did not feel, Wome unlocked the doors. Shokare followed and once inside, he threw open his wet jacket but he refused to look at Wome.

"What's happened?"

"I fucked up. I don't know." Shokare sounded more tired than frightened. He sat and scrubbed a hand over his head. "Has Tope ever been here? Does he know where you live?" Wome shook his head. "I need to stay here for a few days. Look, Wome, I haven't been working since January." He scraped water from his scalp again, puffing out his cheeks.

Wome left him and went to find his spare keys. Then he sat beside Shokare and said, "You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I feel like it. Your roommate won't be a problem?"

"It's fine. He works really long hours" Wome decided to say nothing of Tope's phone call. There was silence. At last, Wome stood. "I'll get you some food."

"Don't bother. I've no appetite." The idea of eating seemed to disgust Shokare. I just want to read for a bit." He pulled a thick book from his bag.

Wome sat to gather himself for a few minutes then he set the spare keys on the arm of the sofa. "I'm going to Manhattan. Call me if you need me." He shut the door behind him and went out. He was tempted to wait behind a tree and see if Shokare would come out again but the thought shamed him. There were no taxis to be had so he went to Atlantic Avenue Station to catch the red line. Even for a night of rain, there was a morbid quiet over his block.

Before Sabine could ask, Wome said, "Shokare had some sort of trouble. I just left him in my apartment." Tears came to Sabine's eyes as he told her about Tope's phone call. He hugged Sabine to him; she repeated over and over like a mantra, "He's so self destructive."

They lay entwined on Sabine's bed, but a barrier of frustration cut between them and crowded out the possibility of intimacy. Sabine whispered, "What will they do, Tope, I mean, if they find him?" Wome's arm snagged tighter about her. He did not have an answer and was glad when Sabine fell asleep.

The next day he waited until midmorning before he paged Shokare but no answering call came. An hour later, he dialed his own number but it simply rang. When he tried again in the afternoon, Shokare picked up on the second ring. He seemed to know it was Wome. Wome squatted in his cubicle and muttered into the receiver. "Is everything alright?"

"Fine. I just came back from the city." Shokare's voice was wary.

"Oh, we could have had lunch."

"No time, I'm afraid. I was looking for work. Hold on" There was a silence then Shokare's voice came again down the line. "Thanks for all this."

"You mean for not asking tough questions? Seriously, when can we talk?"

"Next time you come round."

But Wome found it easy to defer going to Brooklyn that day, and the next also. His mind amplified Shokare's crimes until he was consumed with visions of an armed robbery or worse.

Sabine had even more questions than he did. Over Japanese food, she said, "What happened to that apartment he shared with Magda?" Wome finished his first glass of red wine very quickly and demanded a second. Sabine was alluringly flushed from heat and sake herself but she seemed testy. "You're not worried he'll steal from you?"

"Are you?"

"Not if you aren't. You know him better than I."

What he knew wasn't worth much but Wome was too tired to say so. A smear lingered on his tongue and he ate as if the sushi were unpalatable but must be got down. With a ducklike motion Sabine gulped a bolus of fish. Wome asked, "Why are you so hungry?" Not waiting for an answer, he said, "Shokare hasn't worked since January. And the whole time he acted as though everything was as normal."

Unhelpfully, Sabine said, "You know I've always found him a bit strange." She reddened further as if blushing at her inanity.

They were walking side by side to her flat and Wome tried to think about what he should do but the fizz and blur of haloed lights was distracting when Sabine said a thing that startled him. "Imagine, if you and Magda had gotten together instead that night none of this would be real."

Braced by the cold despite tipsiness, Wome wondered, "And would it have been you and him together? Shokare. Perhaps you might have saved him." He could not say if or who he was mocking. Nor even why.

"I don't know. I felt sorry for him even then. Magda wanted you, you still don't see it? That's why she changed to me."

Better to continue the pretense of blitheness, Wome thought. He said, "You were attracted? To him, I mean? Is that why you're always so...dismissive?"

"I don't dismiss him, Wome." Sabine's face had gone wan. "He's no different than any of us. In some ways, he's...he's quite brave." Wome suspected Sabine been very near to saying something quite different. She leaned away from Wome, asserting her independence. Wome would not have been surprised to see tears standing in her eyes but she turned her face as if some detail on the building alongside drew her attention.

To relieve the tension of the past day, or perhaps because of the words Sabine had not quite been able to say, Wome entered her roughly and without preamble as soon as she came into bed. She acquiesced, and even, he suspected, welcomed the arousal his unwonted brutality stirred in her. Yet she remained silent, however he tried to force a cry from her. Afterward, he rose to fetch water from the kitchen. His loins were chafed and raw. Sabine gathered the blanket about her, twisting her body toward the wall. Wome felt incapable of

dredging up an apology and he swallowed the questions that came to his tongue. It was better, in any case, to spare oneself some answers.

The next night he went home. The apartment empty and his room had been swept clean. His fingers trembled as he paged Shokare. "Meet me in the village," Shokare told him when he rang back. He was in Rialto, his favourite bar.

Shokare set aside the now-familiar big book as Wome slid onto the next stool. "Talk to me,"

"You're the one who needs to talk."

A slight disgruntlement coloured Shokare's eye. "I got involved with, let's say, an associate of Tope's."

"Start at the beginning."

"Ok, I left my job in January. I hated it by then. Probably since September, October, I felt ready to leave. So I quit. I enjoyed the freedom at first. I read, I wrote. The problem was that flat; I told you how high the rent is. But I was managing until I found out my mother needed chemotherapy and so I wanted to go and be with her. I started doing some work with a guy a Brooklyn to make some fast cash. Shit backfired, hence Tope. And the need to lie low."

"So, do you have enough money?"

"I'm ok."

"And what will you do?"

Shokare made a face. "Continue at yours til you kick me out."

"What happened to your things? Furniture, books?"

"Gone." He said it lightly.

"Where?"

"I was staying at Tope's. I took what I could. The rest they can have."

The conversation wearied Wome. Shokare was not telling him everything. He got up to go then said, "I think you should lay a bit lower. Tope called me."

Shokare shrugged. "When?"

"A few minutes after you did. The first time. Whatever it was you did I don't think its going to die down immediately. I have to go." He slapped some money on the bar. Call me when you're really ready to talk, he almost said. But on the subway, he regretted being vindictive. Shokare's nonchalance was a façade and there was no reason to spook him.

At odd hours Shokare lay down fully clothed on the covers of Wome's bed and felt himself sucked down into instant sleep. He came awake just as suddenly with dreams dying in his eyes. Visions of feral dogs with dripping, yellow fur. Deep beneath him, The G train groaned past. The curtains had been drawn tight shut and so he never knew what time it was. He tumbled again into sleep and had a premonition his mother had died.

He dialed her number from Wome's phone but after several rings he replaced the telephone. Sleep pulled him down once more.

Midafternoons Shokare felt most tired, but today he rose and showered. Outside it was like an autumn day, the wind blew stiffly. He squinted his eyes against the bright sunshine as he walked down Atlantic Avenue into Bedford Stuyvesant, past his old neighbourhood. The reeds and rushes alongside the train tracks had grown tall and profuse. He greeted a brown-skinned Trinidadian mechanic he remembered. The man was smoking a cigarette, taking a break from lying beneath a clapped out car nearby. The sun warmed Shokare's flesh a little as he went.

In Bedford Stuyvesant there was a chance he would encounter Chizoba. Shokare did not know what he might do, even in plain view on the street, nor whether carried a gun. In



a shop front Guyanese restaurant he bought a goat roti and ate it from its wax paper wrapping on the subway platform.

It was the lull before rush hour so the trains were not full. Shokare got on an Uptown train and fished his Anta Diop book out of his backpack and began to read. He drowsed and the heavy Anta Diop book fell from his lap. The thud it made woke him up as the train pulled to a halt at Eighty first street. He scrambled off the train, deciding on impulse to go to a museum. His throat itched. The wind swirled out of Central Park, beating up clouds of dust and leaves.

The sidewalk vendor Shokare approached was asking a dollar twenty cents for a bottle of water, and he kissed his teeth and went on his way. A short distance into the park he came to a water fountain and drank deeply, caught his breath, and drank once more. As he wiped moisture from his mouth he was approached by a slim Hispanic man who asked him for the time by simply pointed to his wrist. Shokare told him and he smiled behind insectoid sunglasses. He seemed about to speak then went on his way without offering any thanks, walking with tottering, tiny steps. Shokare laughed out loud, understanding he'd been propositioned. The incident was somehow cheering.

That night, it occurred to him Tale probably did not know Ayiide was very sick. His father would probably blame her for the cancer that was eating her up. It's because you only had one child, he would say. Your organs were not used to their full.

A morning came on which he couldn't pull himself from beneath the covers. There was a dull throb in his back and his sleep had been turgid with dreams he could not recall. In his mouth was the salty taste of tears, which it needed three glasses of water to dispel. Something's wrong, he thought, getting back into bed. But he was not feeble, he did not feel unwell and there was no trace of fever.

He woke to Wome shaking his shoulder. "Shokare, is everything alright?" The question carried an inflection of panic Shokare did not like. It was 6:30 in the evening. Wome insisted on taking him for a meal so Shokare showered but he had no clean clothes so he put on the shirt and underpants he'd worn the previous day.

They walked to Fulton Street for Senegalese food, Wome staying very close to Shokare. Shokare thought for a moment before he remembered what month it was.

*Keur* Pape was not so much bigger than Teranga on 118<sup>th</sup>, but its *Tiebu Djeun* cost ten dollars. They sat facing each other for some time before they were asked for their order. There was a young African American couple a table away who were ordering from Pape himself. Shokare heard the man say to his companion, "It's the Senegalese national dish. You'll love it."

Wome fidgeted. At last he said, "Sabine's worried about you." Shokare hid his surprise. He said nothing. Abruptly Wome confessed, "Work is a struggle. I've not been with Landen Jansen even a year and I think, what's next?"

Shokare thought Wome looked well. Not yet complacent but sure of his place in the world. He would probably marry Sabine. He wondered how often they discussed him.

"What's Sabine worried about?" Shokare's voice was croony with disuse.

"That you'll kill yourself. Not suicide but from self destructiveness."

Shokare shrugged. "Although suicide's not out of the question." Wome took this for a joke and Shokare regretted his moment of self pity. Inexplicably, he wanted to cheer Wome up. "When you get a promotion, it won't be so bad."

"It'll be worse."

The *Tiebu Djeun* was bland, but it did not matter; with hot food in front of him, Shokare's hunger flooded back. The portion was ample but he ate so there was not so much

as a smear of palm oil left on his plate. Then he took an uneaten piece of cassava from Wome's plate.

"How's your mother?" Wome eyes were still wary.

"She's responding well to the chemo." He did not even know if this was lie. "She has a good chance, I think, of recovery. But she says she's never felt so tired in her life." He watched a question die on Wome's lips. The woman at the next table was complaining about the heavy mustard taste of the *yassa* as her partner ate with relish.

Shokare felt alert in spite of the starchy food but Wome announced, "I must get back to Manhattan."

Shokare nodded and they got up. "How are things between you two? Wedding bells soon?"

Wome said, "I'm twenty two. I don't think Sabine's thought about it either." Don't bet on it, Shokare thought, but distantly as if it were the musing of another man.

Wome gave Shokare an odd look. "Would you consider marriage now?"

"Yes, if I found someone with whom I could turn my back on the world." The answer surprised him.

"Turn your back?"

"Yup, go off and live in the middle of nowhere. Write, talk, rut like a rabbit. Or even maybe in a city. London, Paris. But a self contained life."

Wome looked at his feet. "That happens naturally. I don't see Lanre or Christopher any more." At the corner of Fort Greene and Fulton, Shokare watched Wome walk away, not sure he would switch places. Wome's stride had a curious rhythm neither jaunty nor sad. Inside Wome's bedroom, Shokare lashed at the wall. Time was slipping through his fingers and he was no nearer to being with his mother. There was nothing to keep him in New York.

Bivouacking in Wome's apartment had come to resemble confinement. His friend's room in particular was too warm and musty smelling. Shokare shouldered the window open and laughed; he would never be satisfied. He chose one of Wome's CDs at random and removed the Fela disc from his player. He put his hands behind his head and lay back. At six a.m., he was still awake. The CD had played through perhaps ten times and each time he let it begin again. His thirst had gone and the ceiling took on a yellow hue, reflecting the dawn outside. He listened for the tremor of the G train. G For Ghost, as the joke went.

There was nowhere to go but he showered and dressed anyway. On impulse he dialed Wome's office number. "Who's this Koffi Olomide?"

"He's a Zairean singer. Are you listening to it?"

"I played the album all night. Zoned out to it. It's very good." After this admission Shokare had nothing to say and Wome seemed harried and as relieved to ring off as Shokare. The sun had begun to dry the night's rain from the streets and it was warm enough to go about in a t-shirt. Shokare sat on the bed so he had a partial view of the street. He was still listening to Koffi Olomide.

#### April

Wome found his apartment empty, his room deserted with everything in its place. He unearthed Shokare's laptop from beneath the bed. There were a few books in a knapsack beside it. Underwear and socks in plastic bag that smelled liked dust and dry skin. He looked at the heaviest of the books, *The Teachings of Cheik Anta Diop* and flicked through. The pages were thick, the printing cheap. He replaced everything in the dimness beneath the bed and wrote out a note. At the door, Wome turned and thrust the window wide.

He telephoned Derek the next day and his roommate said, "I've not seen him in at least five days. Do you want his pager number?" But Wome had paged him three or four times already.

In the morning he told Sabine calmly, "Shokare's vanished. No calls, no pages, Nothing."

"When last did you speak to him?"

"A week or so. He seemed Ok." His stomach jumped at the smell of coffee but he did not feel he could put anything in it.

Sabine was in a bra and skirt. "Perhaps he went to the UK already."

"He'd have told me if he was going. Plus, I don't think he's got enough money to buy his plane ticket"

In a tone of surprise, she asked, "Is that why he's still in New York?" Why not just give him the money? The plane ticket can't be more than 700 dollars."

"He might need more than that." Wome let a few moments pass as he knotted his tie in the mirror. He was surprised and put on the defensive by Sabine's advice and he said "Besides he's never asked."

In the evening, he was still thinking about it, injured by what had seemed an accusation by Sabine. He blurted, "You think I should have just given him the money, don't you. Weeks ago?"

"I don't know." Lightly, she kissed him. "Anyway, he's probably shacked up with some woman somewhere." Her tone was difficult to decipher. "Having lots of sex and drugs."

Wome stopped paging Shokare. Every other day he left the office at about six and took the Green line to Fort Greene. He was struck by the relative coolness of Brooklyn,

although cloud-strewn skies made the nights balmy. The city continued to wait for the temperature to breach 70 degrees.

He saw signs of habitation in the kitchen that he attributed to Derek. If Shokare had come in, he had been stealthy. His laptop remained in the exact position and Wome counted the briefs and found the same number of pairs. He wrote out another terse note in which he pleasantly asked Shokare to get in contact. Arbitrarily, he threw open the doors of his closet although he did not need to take any clothes with him to Sabine's. Everything seemed in his place. As he was on his way out of his apartment the phone rang. He took it up and a middle aged woman who sounded English asked, "Can I speak to Shokare Osakue?"

"He's not here." Wome gave his own name. "Can I take a message?"

"I need urgently to reach him. Is there another number I might try him on, perhaps?" the voice did not seem troubled. Wome said there was not and offered again to take a message. There was a contemplative pause. "Are you close to Mr. Osakue?" Her accent effortlessly truncated the name. "Is he perhaps a family member?"

"He's my roommate and a close friend. If it's urgent, I'm best able to give him the message."

Again, that eloquent silence as if she were gathering herself. Wome wondered if this faceless woman was reading from a script but the crisp voice broke into his thoughts "Ayiide Osakue is to be discharged from hospital tomorrow. She'll be taken to a hospice. Regrettably, she's been unresponsive to chemotherapy and radiation treatments and her Doctor believes her cancer is terminal." She was saying something else but Wome did not hear the rest. In a whisper, he said, "I'll make sure Mr. Osakue gets the message." He dropped the receiver as if it seared his palm, then stooped to retrieve it. When he put it to his ear, he heard the whine of a dial tone. His hand shook as he tried to dial and his index finger jabbed the wrong buttons. He went into the kitchen and gulped a tumbler-full of

water. Three times he paged Shokare with escalating agitation but his anger was not all for his friend. Where could he be? It seemed, he knew nothing about the man.

Wome dialled Sabine's number and left a curt message. He put on the television to calm himself and watched the news. The main story concerned a burning tenement in the Bronx, which required five fire engines to fight the blaze. Wome switched channels and then turned the television off. Shokare might be dead but he, Wome, had simply to wait for there was no way of knowing. Irrate, he punched in Shokare's pager number once more. Then frantic with the need to talk he tried to reach Kah in the office. She answered on the second ring. How could it be so easy to trace someone an ocean away?

"Can you talk?"

"*Ouadi, mon frère*. What's up?"

"My friend's mother's dying, The hospital in England just rang me. But he doesn't know and I can't find him."

"Why did they call you?"

"He's been staying in my apartment. But he's never here when I come home and I haven't heard from him in a few days."

"Does he hate his mother? Maybe he doesn't want to be reached."

"It's not that." Wome knew Kah was trying to be helpful. "He's....I don't know. Under stress. Anyway, I need a distraction. I sent Maman 500 dollars. D'you think its enough?"

Kah laughed. "It's more than they'll spend in a month, Wome. And I'll send some next month. Hold on" She covered the mouthpiece and spoke to someone. "I have to go."

"But I need to talk."

His sister adopted an office voice; plainly someone remained nearby. "I'll call you back. Yes. Ten minutes."

Wome lounged half on and half off the bed, trying to drum up a connection. June? Isabel? Some book store. The prospect of haring around and stopping into places where Shokare might be seemed counterproductive.

He reached for the phone when it rang. "Are you sleeping?" Kah asked.

"That was a long meeting."

"It's busy here, Wome. Did you hear from your friend?"

"No." He'd lost the strength for complaints.

Kah did not seem to be taking the thing seriously. "Sounds like you don't need to talk anymore."

He was on the point of contradicting her when there was a beep to signal a call on the other line. "I'll call you back."

"Call me tomorrow."

Sabine said, "Cheri. I almost hung up. What are you doing at home?" Her voice was breathless and Wome knew she was tipsy.

He wrestled down bitterness. "I'm waiting for Shokare. They called from the U.K. The hospital."

"Has his mother...Is she...?"

Wome was stingy with information. "She's alive but the chemotherapy doesn't seem to be working."

"And he doesn't know yet? What does that mean 'not working?' Is she going to die?"

"I don't know, Sabine. Shokare's not responding to my pages. I have no idea what's going on." I think I should tell him face to face. I'm going to stay here tonight and see if he comes."

"Let me come."



"No. don't worry." Wome tried to lighten his voice. If he comes in the next hour or so, I'll jump in a taxi and come to you."

"Shit. There goes my mood, I hate to say it. I was out with some girls from work." Sabine steadied herself. "Where the hell would he be, Wome? What kind of person disappears for days and tells no one."

"Well, he might be in some bookstore that'll close soon and he might come here. Let me page him again." Wome noticed a strange smell in the house, like spoiled tomatoes or fermenting fruit. He sniffed over the garbage bin but caught only a fishy odor.

He slept and experienced dreams in which he lacked agency, even the capacity for motion. Dreams that were terrifying in their stasis. Asleep, he saw himself laying in his bed, this very bed in his own apartment, watched from the threshold by a dull eyed bird. In some moments as he tried to concentrate his gaze on it, the bird assumed a cat's form, but he could not be sure. Nothing pinned him to the bed but he remained prone, frozen in place. The television or some other buzz was audible but Wome could not open his throat to make a shout. Outside the window the air was filled with the soundless starbursts of fireworks but the only perceptible noise came from within the apartment. Released at last, he crept on his belly through Brooklyn, resting on subway platforms in wait for trains that sounded down the tunnel but never came. He ran like a lizard, gathering speed, but whatever chased him never fell far behind. He reached for Sabine and finding only vacancy beside him started awake. The looming silence in the room confirmed he was in Brooklyn. A sallow light came through the curtains to intrude on his fatigue.

The phone rang and Sabine said, as if conjured by Wome's thought, "Did he come?"

"I love you," Wome blurted. "I missed you."

*"Moi aussi, Cherie."* She stretched and swallowed a yawn so her voice wavered down the phone. "The bed felt too big and I kept waking up. When you travel I don't notice so much, I think because I know you're far away."

He exhaled. "Shokare didn't come. I'll leave him another note. What else can I do?"

He had written another terse appeal and was reaching down to tie his shoelaces when he heard a key fumble in the slot. Then a disheveled Shokare stood framed in the doorway, his headphones askew on his head. On his back was a backpack Wome had never seen. He assumed a mouth-twisting smile when he noticed Wome but there was an odd sightlessness about his eyes.

Wome found it easiest to say, "Where have you been?" He heard the fluid trill of a *soukous* guitar from the headphones, which Shokare pulled down about his neck with a noticeable reluctance. Wome refused to repeat himself. "A phone call came for you. Yesterday evening. I paged you maybe ten times."

Shokare looked blank. Wome added, as if addressing a dunce, "From London. A call from London. Your mother, Shokare." Shokare's smile did not fade but he seemed on the verge of replacing his headphones on his head. Wome came to his feet, disgusted. "Do you want me to tell you or would you rather call yourself? Where the hell have you been?"

"What did they say? About my mother?"

"Are you sure you want me to tell you? I can't explain..."

"Shut up. She's not..."

"The chemotherapy didn't work. They're going to release her to a hospice today."

Shokare looked skeptical. "Who did you talk to? Is that all they told you?"

"They couldn't tell me much. How could they? They've been trying to reach you but you're not around. That's the only reason they gave me confidential information. They're

going to release her today.” Needlessly, Wome emphasized, “To a hospice. Call them now. If you book....”

“Shut up. Shit.” Shokare scrubbed the headphones to the floor. He cast about as if looking for the phone.

Wome took a long sliding step and wrapped his hand about Shokare’s throat. Not since age eight or nine had he seized anyone by the collar but now he forced Shokare against the wall, heedless of what might break or topple. To keep from hitting him, he mashed his fist into Shokare’s gullet, shouting, “You’ve told me twice to shut up. In my own house. What kind of African are you? I’ve worried to death for over a week. I’ve dialed your stinking pager til I felt a fool.” He snarled, “Four or five times a day. Did you once think of getting in touch to tell anyone you were alive. For God’s sake, Your mother’s almost dead.”

Shokare stopped pushing back. “My pager’s disconnected. I didn’t pay the bill.” He reeked but Wome was not ready to let go. “Can I use the phone?”

Wome relaxed his grip. Shokare went into the bedroom and after a few moments Wome heard his voice through the ajar door but the words were inaudible. He looked at his watch and saw he would be late for work but he did not move. He wanted to extract a promise from Shokare.

“It’s as you said.” Shokare told Wome, exiting the bedroom. His smile was dazed and he moved with a faint hobble. Wome stood in the center of the living room. Any minute he expected his roommate to surface from his room. “She’s quite weak. They increased the drug dosage and it exhausted her.” She’ll get a bit stronger but there’s not more than a month.” Shokare shivered and went into the kitchen. Wome stared after him then followed.

Shokare crouched over the stove, perhaps willing the hissing kettle to boil faster. Still impatient, Wome asked, “When will you go to London?”

"I don't know.

"Shokare, I'll buy you the plane ticket. You should leave as soon as possible.

Tomorrow at the latest."

"Fuck, Wome. When did you become such a pushy cunt?" He smiled again but when he turned to take up the kettle, his face clenched like a fist.

Wome flared back, his mouth full of sudden saliva. "What are you talking about? What is wrong with you? Your life's fallen apart, your mother's dying and what are you doing?" Wome pushed in front of Shokare. "Don't you want to be with your mother. She's dying, Shokare. You're like a spoiled American kid." He wanted Shokare to hit him. He himself ached to punch Shokare but would not start a fight. Shokare's forehead went tight and the vein there throbbed but he said nothing. "I'm offering you the chance to go and see your mother and you want to insult me."

"What? You fucking martyr. Why do you think I should jump at the opportunity to go and see my mother die?" A clatter came from somewhere in the apartment and Wome ignored it. "Would you? As powerless as I feel here, as I've felt for the past fucking month why do you think I'd want to go sit in the hospice or wherever for a month? You want me to go feed her grapes? Hold her wasted hand and reassure her she's still beautiful, the best mother in the world? When the laudanum kicks in we can do crosswords together, is that what you think?"

Wome held up his hands. "Whatever you want, Shokare. You know how to reach me." He did not say, I wash my hands of you, although he wanted to.

As Wome went to open the front door, he sensed Shokare directly behind him and braced for violence. He'd lost all stomach for a fight and only wanted to get away from the apartment. But Shokare said in a voice forced through his teeth, "I'm going to call my father.

If he won't give me the money, I'll take you up on your offer." His face had gone flat with suppressed crying. Wome only nodded.

The phone on Wome's desk rang and his first fear proved correct. Shokare said, "I need your help but not with money. I want to get advance parole."

Wome wished he could peer down the phone and see Shokare's face. "Why do you need advance parole?"

"My student visa expired in February. I don't have a job so they won't just let me walk back in the U.S. I want you to be a character witness for me with the INS."

"Why do you want to come back?"

"I'm coming back. Where else would I go?"

"Look. Let me meet you for lunch. I can't talk.

At a deli on 30<sup>th</sup> Street Wome bought sandwiches for the two of them. He had questions about Shokare's father but was given no chance to ask them.

"My dad wants me to come to Nigeria. 'You need to spend some time with your family,' he told me. He'll be in London tomorrow. I bet Eyitemi—that's his second wife—is pissed off." His eyes were too bright, and Wome noticed how thin his face had become. Shokare began to eat like a starved wolf.

"So you're not going to Nigeria?"

Shokare snorted. "It'll take Tale a month, maybe two to remember that he can't stand me and that I'm a disappointment."

"And what will you do when you come back here?"

The Nigerian's eyes became if anything more shiny. "Well, I'm writing something different. I met this guy, he's homeless and lives in a subway tunnel close to Broadway Lafayette . Messianic, Wome. That's the only word I can use to describe him. That's where

I've been at night." He grinned with pride. "Just taking notes. The things he thinks and says. He's completely mad and yet not. But not in a sometimes-lucid, sometimes-raving way. Shit, I can't explain. Anyway, I'm going to base a novel on him. Something Ayn Randish and didactic. A man who leads a revolution that starts with crowds of homeless vagrants in the subway but then sweeps across the entire country." Wome finished his sandwich, wishing Sabine were present to hear Shokare's talk. He kept silent, unwilling to mask his anger. If he got up and walked away there'd be no one else. Shokare was entirely alone, utterly penniless perhaps mentally ill. Why else would a man talk of coming back, of spending nights in the subway while his mother lay wasting away if he were not sick.

Wome felt too weak to contradict Shokare but he cut in. "I'll go with you to 26 Federal Plaza. But I promise you my being there will mean nothing."

Wome wept that night as he related his conversation with Shokare, burying his head in Sabine's lap. He could not remember crying uncontrollably but at last he fell silent. He wanted to apologize for crying but instead fell asleep. Sabine levered him beneath the bed covers and tugged off his trousers. The perilous dreams returned and in the morning, Wome struggled awake, feeling clubbed, and went to meet Shokare.

He picked the Nigerian out in the line by his oversize headphones and at sight of his friend, Wome's strength flagged and he found himself unable to approach him. From a stone throw's away he watched Shokare for a sign of madness. Every few moments he made a gesture with his head—not quite a nod—in response to the music, presumably.

He touched Shokare's arm, almost shouting so he would be heard. "Do you have everything you'll need?"

"Morning, Wome" Shokare set the headphones about his throat like a torc. Beneath his open jacket, he wore a clean shirt and he'd shaved so his cheeks seemed even more beggarlike and concave. He'd even clumsily spit-rubbed his shoes. A sad fox, Wome

thought, ambivalence descending over him. Shokare replaced his headset as if unable to bear being without music. Standing alongside and slightly behind, Wome once more considered simply walking away. His friend or, he thought acidly, his dependant would not notice for many minutes. The line had not yet begun to move. He tapped Shokare's arm again.

"So, what did your subway prophet say last night?"

Shokare's eyes filled with sudden, inexplicable tears. He replaced his headphones and turned his back on Wome. Then he pulled the earpieces apart and muttered, as though fearful of eavesdroppers, "There's no need to go in with me. I'll be fine on my own." Wome felt no contrition. Stiffly, he said although he doubted Shokare would hear him, "No. I want to be here so you don't sabotage your chance of advance parole."

Shokare's crying did not stop and instead became copious and he did not try to hide that he was crying. He darted his head forward with the music and little gasps escaped him now and then like sighs of pain. The man in front turned and scrutinized them with a pretense at studying the line.

If the security guards noticed Shokare's running nose and wet face, they gave no sign. Their fat faces smooth, they handed him a tray for the things in his pocket. Weeping presented no threat to security. Wome tried to summon the tenderness to tell Shokare to pull himself together. Tears might be misinterpreted and would not help his petition. But Shokare walked on. Wome's lips refused to form words of apology. A woman with her child, a boy with girlishly long hair, joined them in the elevator just as the doors began to close. The boy did not leave off staring at Shokare, and, feeling himself watched, Shokare turned a pained smile on the child. His eyes were already red. This is what you wanted, Wome thought. You wanted to see him show emotion and here are tears that will not stop. It was absurd, the notion he'd made Shokare cry when imminent bereavement had failed to do so.

Shokare allowed Wome to guide him into the waiting room, where he took a number. .

They sat. The waiting room was not full and Wome could hear Shokare's music. It was Koffi Olomide but a different album. "Which Koffi album is that?" Shokare did not understand him at first then he answered but it was one Wome did not know. "Where did you get it?"

"I bought it bootleg in Harlem." Shokare smiled shyly, fingering the cord of his headset. "Five bucks."

"Is it good?"

"It's very good. Koffi's kept me sane these past weeks. When I'm listening to him I feel...it's not me that's crazy." Wome made no response and instead turned to watch petitioners enter the room in ones and twos.

Shokare's number was called after Wome had begun to doze. Shokare woke him with a touch on his knee and then he dashed to the front of the room.

Wome was not surprised to see the bilious official with glasses he remembered from his own visit. Shokare took his time putting away his headphones so there was no chance to warn him before he slapped his passport onto the counter and slid it through the little iron mouth beneath the glass. The passport was scanned and then set aside. The official's eyes swam behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "Is this your lawyer?" he looked significantly at Wome.

"Character witness."

"Speak up."

"I said he's my character witness."

The man's eyes widened in mockery. He pursed his lips and laughed. "So what can we do for you?" Shokare told him and he began to look through the passport a second time, more slowly as if to spot some incriminating stamp. "Do you have a letter from your employer?"



"No. I'm between employers. I'm still eligible for practical training though."

"Well, do you have a letter from a prospective employer?"

"No."

"So tell me why you should be let back into the U.S."

"I...I have a lot to offer this country." Shokare seemed on the point of renewed weeping then his voice steadied but he continued to clutch the counter.

The immigration official did not jeer. "Wait here." He went out through the door behind him.

Wome said: "This one's the worst. He takes pleasure in humiliating people." Perhaps, he thought, you should mention your mother. They did not wait long. The official returned with an unfamiliar form and leaned on the counter.

"Fill this out and bring it back to me. You'll have to leave your passport when you come back. We try to respond in less than a month but no promises." He was looking already past them, ready to call the next petitioner.

"A month. I was hoping to get it today. I'm due to travel tomorrow."

"Today. Ha. This is the INS, Sonny boy. We don't get anything done in two weeks, much less one day."

Shokare squared himself. "My mother's quite sick. Terminal, actually. In a month she might have passed on." The official's mouth lost its smirk but behind the glasses his eyes still twinkled. It was, Wome guessed, a familiar line. "I'm sure there's some procedure in exceptional cases. Can I speak to a supervisor?"

"Nope." The official bared carious teeth and jerked a thumb toward his chest. "I am the supervisor. And you've wasted enough of my time. Your options: fill out the form, bring it back and wait to hear from us or walk out of here. Good day."

Shokare took the form and collected his passport. Wome felt useless. On the ground floor, he said, "What will you do?"

Shokare was walking very fast. "I'll leave."

"And try to come back?"

"Maybe, maybe not." His voice had gone dead; there was no trace of the earlier weepiness.

They walked past blank-eyed security guards and the men and women shuffling in in single file to offer various pleas.

Wome was eager to make amends. "I'm not expected at work until noon. Let me take you for breakfast." Shokare met his eyes with effort but he seemed willing. On Hudson Street, they found a folksy diner with Tribeca prices. Wome ordered a massive breakfast and forced himself to eat slowly. Shokare shunted his eggs and sausage about in melted butter on the plate. Wome felt a curious compulsion to reminisce. Remember when..... Remember that time..... But his relationship to Shokare had been shifted onto shaky ground by the Nigerian's erratic form. And the memories he wished to invoke were not happy, in fact they were hollow and seemed to belong to other men. Shokare had, he decided, in any case ceased to see him as flesh and blood.

The morning crowd had gone and the restaurant was almost empty. The waitress brought their bill. "What time is your flight?" Wome asked

"A little before midday." Shokare stood as soon as the change was placed on the table and pulled his backpack onto his back. On the corner, Wome watched a woman pushing her daughter in a sleek, three-wheeled stroller. Shokare was taking out his headphones and Wome wondered if he too were uncomfortable with the prospect of saying farewell.

Shokare squinted at him through the sunlight. "There's no need to come by the apartment later to say good bye." Wome started to speak but Shokare rode over him. "I'm going into the tunnel. If I have to write this book in Lagos, I will." Wome could only bring himself to nod and then they shook hands; Shokare's squeezed a little too hard and Wome bit back a wince. Neither seemed willing to break the eye contact.

"Take care of yourself." Wome turned to go then stopped. "Do you have enough money for a taxi to the airport?"

"I'll be fine." Shokare seemed in no hurry to move on.

The next day, Wome dialed his own Brooklyn number. It was noon, a fine hot day and the hoots and shouts that came faintly up from the street below seemed to announce the early arrival of summer. The phone rang and rang until the answering machine switched on and he listened all the way through to his own muffled, tentative voice offering instructions.

### Epilogue

Not until the summer did Wome get word of Shokare. And it came obliquely and from an unexpected source. He had ceased to think about his friend and felt there was little time for much besides work and spending time with Sabine. For many months there had been no contact with Christopher either and his telephone call caught Wome by surprise.

"Did you hear? Your boy's dead."

Paul Biya, Wome thought. Has there been a coup. "Who?"

"Shokare. The Bendelite," Christopher added as though speaking of someone they both knew only slightly. He was killed in an armed robbery in Lagos." Christopher's excitement gave way to a new tone, musing. "Funny, it was almost exactly a year ago we met him, isn't it?" Wome said nothing, waiting for Christopher to laugh and confess to pulling his leg. But the Ghanaian instead said, "And what was he doing in Lagos? Wasn't he the one that told us not to go home?"

"Chris, let me call you back. Are you sure?"

"Call Lanre, if you don't believe. It was in the *Naija* papers. His dad's a well known ..."

But Wome did not hear what Christopher said next because he'd set down the receiver, carefully, as if it might crack.